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February 5, 1896.

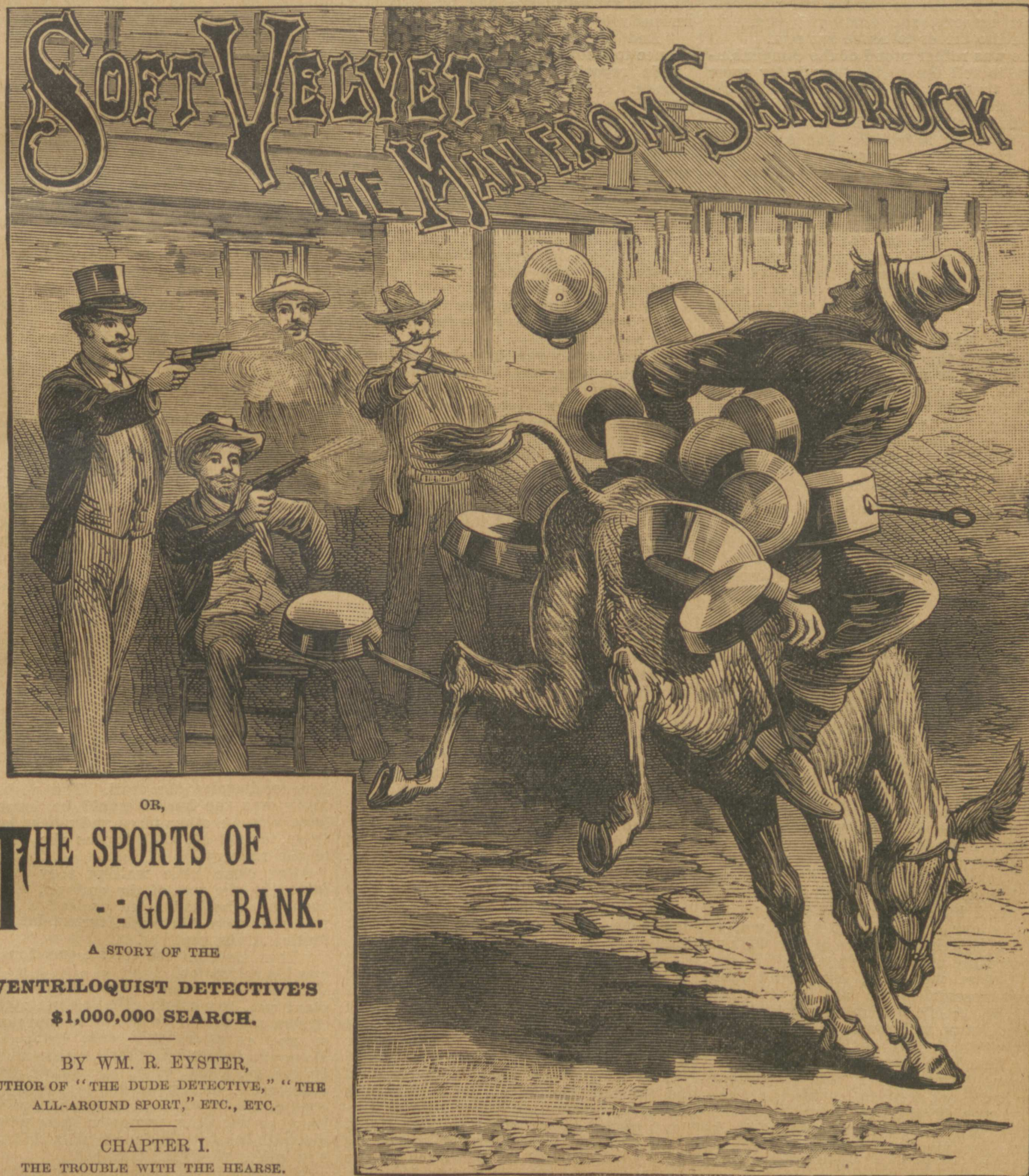
No. 902.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXX.



OR,

THE SPORTS OF - : GOLD BANK.

A STORY OF THE

**VENTRILOQUIST DETECTIVE'S
\$1,000,000 SEARCH.**

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE DUDE DETECTIVE," "THE
ALL-AROUND SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TROUBLE WITH THE HEARSE.

THE stage for Gold Bank was making its
schedule time, and the load being of the

"HOWLD ON, WILL YEZ!" YELLED THE IRISHMAN. "D'YES WANT ME TO BEGIN
TO SHOOT MESILF?"

lightest, the chances were that it would reach that thriving camp sooner than expected.

Lame Johnny had hold of the ribbons, and though he was not the regular driver, but an extra, on for this trip, he had as good an idea of when and where to make time, how to nurse a team, and when to put them to their best, as any man who ever drove over the trail.

With his foot handy to the brake, and his teams well in hand, he was rolling down the long grade five miles from Bed Rock, and though he was carrying on a lively conversation with his one passenger, he all the time kept a sharp lookout for the contingencies of the trail.

The single passenger was on the box with him, and, moreover, was a woman.

That is, she was a woman as regards sex; but in years she was little more than a girl.

She was a handsome girl, however, and her name was Molly Horton.

During the first part of her journey there had been other passengers in the stage, and when they had dropped out she remained for a time inside; but, finding it lonesome and having certain other reasons, she obtained permission from the driver to share his seat.

He was rather proud of the companionship, to tell the truth, though for some little time he had seemed in a study, and his meditations were not altogether of the most pleasant kind.

"You see, miss," he was saying, as his eyes scanned narrowly a bit of the road which led between banks as high as the top of the stage, "I don't just look for a ruction to-day, because they never make a water haul, and there's not enough plunder on the old hearse to justify; but when I gathered up the reins way back in the start, I more than half looked for a call from the Black Don."

"The Black Don! And who may he be?"

"Don Natan, for short. He runs the tollgate on this trail, and it's about time for him to be out looking up the taxes."

"Ah, an outlaw, I suppose. I have heard a band spoken of, but understood there was little danger of meeting them this trip. It seems they have been working lately in a different section, a hundred miles away."

"That is no sign. They are always working where they are least expected. And then I had a hint. I didn't understand it then, or I might not have been willing to take up the ribbons. I hope to heaven you are to be in no danger. If you are, I will protect you with my life."

He spoke earnestly, and Molly Horton gazed at him in a troubled way.

"Why should I fear this Black Don? So far as I have heard he has never harmed those who did not resist, but quietly gave up their valuables."

"That is true; but he can be a terrible man when he is crossed or resisted—a man without mercy."

"But I do not intend to resist. It will be uncomfortable for me to lose my pocketbook, but I will not be altogether wrecked. You will take me on to Gold Bank, and I certainly can obtain a lodging there for a day or two, until Hal comes. And I can draw on my banker at any time. Oh, the hundred dollars I have will certainly be enough to pay our toll, and the worst will be that I may have to lose a few days in prosecuting my researches."

"Excuse me, miss, but would those same researches be apt to interfere with or trouble any one in Gold Bank? I don't want to know your secrets or be inquisitive, but if anything happens it may be a help to untie the tangle."

Lame Johnny spoke with seriousness, but it did not seem to trouble the young lady, who laughed carelessly.

Her previous worry appeared to be gone; she was nearing the end of her journey, and was too hopeful to take his warning seriously, though at first she had been a trifle startled.

"I do not think there is any one here who would try to hinder them. I am

looking for an Irishman, one Michael Dugan, who at one time was the trusted employe of my father, though so far I have not breathed a word about it to any one but Hal Keene. I can trust him, and I will not tell even you the questions I would ask him."

"Sorry, miss, but it's a pity you didn't say that much sooner. I might have saved you a fool's errand. Mickey left the camp a year ago, and hasn't been heard of since."

"Left the camp?"

"Yes, though by the same token it was not because the camp wanted to part company. They were after him with a rope. Small blame to them if they didn't catch up, for they tried their best."

"With a rope! What were they after him for? What did they think he had done?"

"They thought he had scooped in a tenderfoot. I think they found out afterward that was a mistake, but mistakes didn't cut much ice at the time. They were after blood and hair."

Molly Horton's face fell. This was a check which might have been counted on, but evidently she had not expected seriously to meet it.

"And he is really gone—without a chance to know where?"

"So reported. There is his family, though. They may know something about him and be keeping it dark."

"Oh, his family? He had a wife, then?"

"Yes. They live in the same little shack up the gulch, and the old woman manages to get along about as well as when Mickey was to the front. Whoop! Dog-gone it!"

The sudden change in Lame Johnny was startling, but its explanation came a second or two later. There was a swish of a rope from the trailside, and a noose came hurtling over the head of the off leader. At the same time a harsh voice hailed them:

"Throw over yer brakebar, Johnny, an' take a long pull, an' a strong pull. That leader hez been looped afore, an' won't go another foot, but ef yer tries ary fool play we got yer kivered, an' down yer go."

Mechanically, Johnny did as he was ordered. Resistance, at best, would have been folly, and flight was not to be thought of. When the leader felt the rope tightening around its neck it came to a halt, and stood shivering. The rest of the horses plunged a little, but not enough to carry their unwilling companion off its feet.

And at the same time, out from the trailside stepped three or four men, masked and fully armed, who covered the driver with their weapons.

The lame one recovered his courage in a twinkling.

"Say, boss, you're a leetle previous, after all. The colonel dropped off ten mile back, at Pandey Williams's ranch, and he wasn't carrying no great load of coin. The whole cargo's right hyer on my box, and we're ready to fork over. We haven't got much, but you're welcome to it."

"Oh, dry up! We don't want chatter, an' you'll only git ther leddy skeered. Dump yourself!"

"Eh?"

"Git down frum that box—an' ett's ther last time ov askin'. We're runnin' this thing."

There could be no mistaking the tone of the order, and Lame Johnny swung himself down without a word of protest. These fellows had the drop, and a full exhibition of his brains would not add to the comfort of the situation, so far as the lady was concerned.

The moment he reached the roadbed he was marched off at the muzzle of a revolver, while the leader of the outlaws turned his attention to Miss Molly.

"Now, sorry to bother you, mum, but duty are duty, an' we'll hev ter ax yer ter dismount. We need this hyer ole hearse, an' we'll see yer don't hev fur ter go on foot."

Some girls would have screamed; oth-

ers would have wept. Miss Horton did neither.

With the utmost coolness she sprung down.

She drew her skirts away from the fellow who approached her, but at the order of the leader allowed him to escort her from the spot.

In a few minutes a man came limping back. In appearance he was the exact counterpart of the late driver, yet, as he settled himself in the seat and gathered up the lines, the spokesman of the road agents gave him a parting warning:

"Mind yer, keep yer breath quiet, an' light out afore mornin'. You'll pass in ther twilight, but in broad day ett wouldn't be hard ter see ther difference."

The driver cracked his whip, the horses started off at a lively trot, and Molly Horton was left behind.

CHAPTER II.

IMPRISONED BY THE GORGE.

There never was a more surprised man than Lame Johnny when he discovered how things were turning out.

When the coach was stopped he had no idea but it was for plunder merely, and that when they had given up what coin was on hand they would be allowed to proceed without farther question.

He thought he knew there would be some disappointment when the outlaws learned the most important passenger of the trip had got out before the hold-up; but that was not his fault, or Miss Molly's, and he did not anticipate they might be called upon to pay for it.

Johnny did not see the man who took the coach along in his place, nor did he suspect any game was afoot which might involve his name and reputation. They had taken his coat and hat from him, but why it was done he had not stopped to ask.

One thing he did know before very long.

The two were to be held as prisoners, and it seemed as though for an indefinite time. As to what was the scheme behind this they were, for the present, to receive no hint.

They were taken only far enough away from the trail to escape observation, and perhaps prevent their seeing what disposition was to be made of the coach. Then they were halted by their guides, and bidden to wait for the boss.

They waited patiently enough, since there was nothing else to do, and during the waiting heard the roll of wheels as the stage moved on.

Johnny listened anxiously until the sound died away in the distance, and satisfied himself that the horses had not been left to their own unguided wills. A competent hand was evidently holding the reins, and guiding the animals in the way they should go.

He shrugged his shoulders, but still said nothing. This time the joke was on the stage company as much as on the passengers. The only wonder to him was that so much trouble should be taken to disguise the trail. The probability was the horses would be turned loose at some other place and marks left there to indicate that it was the place of the robbery.

After some little waiting they were joined by the rest of the outlaws, when the man who had acted as leader, and who still wore his mask, turned his attention to the captives.

"Thar ain't no use ter ax questions," was his salutation.

"You'll do jest ez you're told, er we'll plant yer, too quick. Ef you act right like ez not thar'll be no harm done; an' ef not, actin' rough'll only bring ett along the sooner. Ef thar's a chance fur ye ter git away, er ef ary galoot kim a-botherin', ther game are to shoot yer dead on ther spot. An' from what you've heard ov our gang, you orter know when we pull trigger thar's no miss follers. You sabbe all right, Limpy?"

"I reckon I do. I'm not taking chances that I don't, anyhow."

"Good enough. I won't be with ther gang fur a while, but they haz ther or-

ders, an' kin be relied on ter kerry 'em out. So long."

The fellow coolly mounted his horse, which had been led up with a number of others, and, with a wave of his hand, turned once more toward the stage trail and galloped away.

The absence of the leader was an element of inquietude rather than satisfaction.

Evidently he held his men well in hand while present, but how would it be when once out of sight? And what orders had he left? What was the meaning of it all? Molly Horton retained her coolness and her courage, but she could not help looking serious when she thought over these things.

They were not kept in doubt long in regard to the next move.

Two horses were brought forward, the prisoners were mounted, and a flight began, which took them away from all signs of settlements or trails, and into a region with which Lane Johnny was utterly unacquainted. When night came a camp was made in a desolate spot, but with the morning the flight began again.

The young lady was treated with a respect which was almost reassuring, and if such a close watch had not been kept on him, even Lane Johnny might have thought there was as little to complain about as was possible under the circumstances.

It was wearing work, however, and when the flight had been kept up for some days, it began to look as though fatigue and suspense were going to force an ending. Molly felt within herself that she could not go much further, and was glad enough to hear what was evidently meant to be a few words of encouragement.

"You've bin doin' well, leetle woman, an' ef you'll keep it up tell to-morrer you'll hev a chance ter rest. We bin a kinder holdin' up on your account, but I reckon now you kin make ther rifle."

"But where are we going?" asked the young lady, allowing her anxiety to find expression in words.

"You tells me no questions, I asks yer no lies," ez ther poet sez. It'll be kinder lonesome, no doubt, an' thar'll be a mighty good chance ter say yer prayers. You'll find out ther rest when yer gits thar."

It seemed vain to ask for further information, as the man turned away with a stubborn look on his face, though, no doubt, he had spoken in all kindness.

As for Johnny, there had never been a better prisoner.

He was at home in the saddle, and appeared to view the whole matter as a frolic. So far he had said nothing to Molly which he would have been unwilling for their captors to hear; and on certain occasions he let fall a hint that, being with a crowd which could levy taxes at their own royal will was a good deal better than being an extra driver on the Gold Bank stage route.

For all that, he did not expect to have his chance—just yet; and was almost as glad as was Molly Horton when they reached what was, for the present, the end of their journey.

Yet Molly was not altogether happy. She looked around her with a shiver, after the first feeling of thankfulness that the flight was to be continued no further. It was lonesome, indeed; and it struck her that if ever she had need to say her prayers it was then.

They were hemmed in a wild and desolate gorge, which looked as though never trodden before by the foot of man, and the small cave in which she was installed was both cold and cheerless.

Johnny was somewhat better off. Whether he was trusted or not, he was to be utilized. After some little grumbling on his part he was allowed to try his hand at the cooking, and so great was his success that he received a qualified promotion on the spot.

It was better than moping in bonds, and though he saw less and less opportunity for escape, yet within certain limits he had a comparative freedom.

Moreover, he saw that now and then he would most likely have an opportunity for a word or two with Molly.

The first day he made himself as familiar as possible with his surroundings, and on the second had a gleam of hope. Another prisoner was brought into camp, and he had been captured in the neighborhood of the spot.

It was pretty certain he had not been held up for the sake of plunder. His appearance forbade that.

He looked like a tramp prospector of the rougher sort, who had wandered into that region, and no doubt he was held lest he might go back to the settlements and tell what he had seen. The only wonder was that he had not been killed on the spot.

Perhaps he would have been had he not been taken so thoroughly by surprise that, with the drop on him, he had not offered any resistance.

Johnny knew there was no use for him to think of escaping on foot—his lameness was in the way.

But here was a chance to get word to the outside world. The stranger was tightly bound when the night came on, and rolled away by himself. The chances were that he would be dead before morning, by reason of impeded circulation, if left to himself, and the ex-driver of the Gold Bank coach made up his mind to a desperate effort.

He, too, was a prisoner, but there was a route along a narrow ledge which was barely practicable, and by which he fancied he might reach the prospector.

Once there, he could relieve him of his bonds, post him as to the best way to evade the sentry lower down the gorge, give him a message for a friend in Gold Bank, and let him go to take his chances rejoicing. Failure could make matters no worse.

There was no failure, and Johnny succeeded in returning to his own lair without leaving any trail behind him. The escape of the prisoner was not learned until morning, and then the method of it remained a mystery. Pursuit was made, but the fellow had vanished.

Johnny communicated something of this to Miss Horton, and the two resigned themselves to waiting and wondering what would be the upshot of the mystery of their captivity.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN WITH THE BURRO.

The evening sun lay low in the western sky and flooded with its slanting rays the roofs of Gold Bank.

Right on the crown of the mountain trail a single traveler halted for a moment to look down at the camp.

He was an odd-looking genius, and his belongings were as odd as himself, though, had he been on foot simply, he might have seemed no more than a fair specimen inhabitant of that "wild and woolly" land.

A closer look under the narrow brim of his high-peaked wool hat would have revealed the fact that, though he might be an American citizen, he was of Irish extraction, and that there was a reflective twinkle in his keen eyes, which told that the scene below was stirring him up for a deeper cause than its mere picturesque beauty.

He waved his hand theatrically, and then, in the richest of brogues, began a soliloquy:

"Wan year since Oi lift, an' phot a change Oi say forninst me. Oi wonder wor Bridget an' dhe childer grown as much, an' av dhe shanty up dhe gulch have changed to a pallis?"

He paused a moment to throw his glance beyond the town, as if in search of that same gulch and the shanty he had spoken of.

"Thin I wor a poor, hunted baste, wid-out a dime in me pocket or a clane shirt to me back—an' joost look at me now! Phat will Bridget be afther spakin' when she says dhe outfit? Sure, she'll think Oi have bin d'alain' wid dhe custoom house, an' run away wid dhe ranche."

He looked around him proudly, as

though he expected to see Bridget holding up her hands—as she well might be doing if she had been on the spot.

The man was almost invisible behind the outfit.

He was mounted on a smooth-looking little burro, which was gazing down into the valley a good deal more composedly than himself. His legs hung down on either side of the little brute, and his feet almost touched the ground; but for all of that, the stout little animal had carried him that day a good many more miles than he would have cared to walk, and looked as though it was good for a still further jaunt before the sun went down.

Outside of the Irishman, the burro had quite a load in seeming, but in reality its weight did not amount to so much.

Around the rider were hung dozens of pans. There were piepans, stewpans, fryingpans—tinware and sheet iron for the most part, and of every description.

"To think av me, dhe poor mon av Poverty Gulch, comin' back wid an outfit loike dhis, an' coin in me pocket; an' it's ownly a year sence Oi went out wid all Gowld Bank riddy to lynch me for dhe tricks av a worse mon. Quoite respectably Oi am now, wid a businiss av me own; an' whin Oi start out agin on me rounds, it's wapin' dhey'll all be, to have me shtay."

He paused in his monologue, and looked about with a proud air. No doubt he had a walking fortune with him that would greatly impress Bridget, as well as the men of the town, who had known him of old.

The day was wearing on, however, and Gold Bank, in the distance, was not half as interesting as Gold Bank would be close at hand.

He flourished his stick, spoke to his burro, and the procession moved on—for at least a couple dozen yards.

Then a halt was called, as sudden as it was unexpected. From the side of the trail there rose a shout:

"Halt there! Hands up! Make another move an' y'r dead meat!"

"Whoop, Jimmy!" promptly yelled the Irishman; but Jimmy, having started again, was in no particular hurry to stop.

He stuck his head up at the sound, and gave strong indications of a desire to bolt. If the Irishman had not grasped the reins with both hands and exerted power enough to have fairly lifted the little animal off his feet, he would have gone rushing down the mountain side.

But that made it impossible to raise his hands, so he only half obeyed the orders of the concealed challenger.

"Crack! Whang!"

Without waiting for explanation a pistol shot was fired, and it was lucky for the traveler that he was fairly well protected by his barricade.

The bullet went crashing through half a dozen pans.

The articles were made especially for mountain peddling from the back of a burro.

There were holes in the handles, and where there were no handles the pans had each a little ring of wire through which a cord could be passed. As the things were strung so as to make as great a show as possible, there was a fair chance for a jingling accompaniment, and that one bullet woke the echoes.

"Howld on, will yez? Oi'm doin' the bist Oi can! D'yez want me to begin to shoot, mesilf?" yelled the Irishman, more in anger than fear.

The shot appeared to have a better effect on the burro than on its master, for the little brute halted at the crack and stood stock still in its tracks.

Then up went the hands of the rider, just as three men stepped out from where they had lain concealed by the wayside.

They were all clad in Mexican style, and at first sight made rather a gay appearance, in spite of the black masks which covered their faces.

Nevertheless, there was a slouchiness about their gait which did not altogether

correspond with their outfit, and the voice of the leader had an unmistakably American sound.

"Dump yourself!" he ordered sharply, as he covered the motionless figure of the victim.

"An' no nonsense. You talked about shootin', an' that's wornin' enough fur us. At ther fust move down yer go."

"An av yez wants me to git down, how kin Oi av Oi don't move?"

"You git that move on, an' do less chinnin'. We'll 'tend ter how hard yer hits ther ground. We want a little talk with yer, an' hyer's ez good a place ez any."

"Dhe move has it. Now, phat do yez want?"

In a way that must have been learned by long practice, the Irishman swung himself off his burro, leaving the best part of his load behind him.

"Yer name's Mike Dugan, eh?"

"Roight yez are."

"One time working with Halsey Horton?"

"It's on dhe string yez have it!"

"Run out of Gold Bank a year ago on suspicion of having killed a tenderfoot and robbed his corpse?"

"It wor a bloody loie. Dhe tenderfoot came back a wake afther Oi lift—but dhe charge wor dhe makin' av me."

"So we see; an', afore we forgit it, shell out!"

"But, sure, yez wouldn't rob a poor gossoon phat has a woife an' four childer to support be dhe sweat av his brow?"

"Sweat ov yer jaw, yer means. That's what yer works wid, but yer can't play it on us. Last time ov askin'. Keep yer hands up an' we'll do ther rest."

It did not look as though there could be much danger in the proceeding. Mike had his hands up and was covered by two men.

The speaker for the outfit advanced with a hand stretched in the direction of the Irishman's pocket.

But Dugan's stick was in the air, along with his hands, and the chance was too good to be resisted.

There was a sudden twist of the wrist, and down came the cudgel.

It lit fairl' on the head for which it was intended, and sounded like the thump of the stick on a bass drum.

"Och! Whillaloo, murther! Have at yez! It wor as will to doie phor a shape as a lamb!" yelled the Irishman, flourishing his stick, his fist describing a figure eight in the air as he sprung forward.

The movement was so unexpected that it caught the pair off their guard. They had actually suffered their muzzles to droop as they looked at the fun.

Probably that was what saved the life of the bold Celt. As the barrels were coming up he was giving a straight cut with his cudgel, and it fell twice before the sharp crack of a revolver rang out.

The finale was a little different from what might have been expected, for both men went down, and for just an instant there were four men on the trail.

Mike, however, was neither dead nor dying, and when he struck the earth he did not lie still.

His heels flew up over his head, and he rolled backward like a revolving cart-wheel, dumping himself over the edge of the gulch which lined the further side of the trail before the first man down had scrambled to his knees.

It was all quick work, for no sooner were the men down than they seemed to be rising again; but as they finally sprung to their feet they heard a voice that was soft but deadly cold.

"If you men live around here, it's all right; but if you don't, you better hunt your holes. I've got two of you lined, and I reckon I can plug the other before he can draw."

CHAPTER IV.

A CARELESS STRANGER.

Men like these outlaws of the trail, who had an experience of the rougher ways of life before they took to the road, and who had been living with their lives

in their hands ever since, were just the most competent judges in the world as to whether the intruder held a pat hand or was only bluffing.

If there had been the slightest suggestion of nervousness in his voice, or the least trifle of a braggadocio sound in his words, they would have wheeled like lightning and run their chances.

But, from the sound, this man was not far off, and they could depend on it that when his finger tightened on the trigger no nervousness of his would throw his bullets wild.

Perhaps, too, the shillalah of Mike Dugan had taken some of the courage out of them. They were willing to temporize.

"Hold on, thar, dog-gon ett!" shouted the leader, without ever turning.

"Ett war on'y a bit ov a bluff game on Micky. He cl'ared outen Gold Bank a year ago, with half ther camp chasin' him—an' they was kerryin' ropes ez they follered. What's he comin' back fur, now, ter bother ther widder?"

"That's all right, gents. You just take a walk, and there won't be a bit more trouble about it. If he had stayed with you I suspect he and his stick would have got away with the outfit. If he has hurt himself by his fool tumble over the bank I'll look after him, but I don't propose to do it while you have a chance at my back. Get a move on."

The spokesman was getting his wits back, and from what had been said he fancied the revolvers of the stranger were trained on his companions. He had his own ideas about what time it would take him, and how sure he could sling lead with a snapshot.

His hand darted to his belt, and as he wheeled he drew to fire.

"Crack!"

The careless stranger saw the movement was coming and was ready for it. With a simple turn of his hand he shifted his aim and then let go.

The outlaw sprang about a yard into the air and gave a howl, while his pistol went flying endways.

He shook his hand in a double gesture of pain and anger, and yelled:

"Down him, boys; down him hard! Curse him, he's doctored my hand, an' I'm a cripple fur life. Down him, I say, er I'll even up with you."

"Scarcely, for if this thing goes any further there'll be no one left to even with. Your friends probably observe I still have them covered. But keep your linen on, for I am ready to drill you!"

The bullet had been aimed fairly enough for the barrel of the revolver the outlaw had been bringing around, and had not missed its mark, either; but some of the lead had stripped off, and spattered into his hand, so that the fellow thought his hurts were a great deal worse than they were.

The cold, calm voice of the stranger brought him to his senses, and he saw very plainly that his pards were going to make no move so long as those barrels menaced them.

He could hardly blame them, either, after the specimen they had of first-class snapshot work.

"Hold on, pard," he shouted, half afraid that the drilling would begin if he hesitated. "We cave. It's your say so, and if yer asks fur ther game without playin' fur it, it's yourn. Ef yer won't let us explain we may ez well git."

"Now you are shouting. Elevate your digits, and take a promenade up the trail. I'll risk your shooting from the other side of the ridge, and if I see you on this—good-bye, John!"

"It goes jest ez yeu says, pardner. So long!"

With hands well up over his head the outlaw stepped off in the direction of the divide, and his companions fell in by his side.

One man to three looked like long odds the wrong way, but one man with the drop on two, and a past master with the pistol, was a little more than an even thing, after all.

Thirty yards away the temptation seized one of them mighty hard, and he

even turned his cheek the slightest bit, by way of experiment.

"Steady, as you are!"

The stranger was still watching, and could note even that trifling bit of indiscretion. Not one of the three hesitated again until they had crossed the crown of the ridge and were lost to sight on the opposite side. They were just beyond pistol shot then, and there was no danger either side would begin hostilities.

Then, for the first time, the stranger allowed his eyes to rove around in search of Mike Dugan.

Of course, there was no sign of him on the trail, and when he looked over into the gulch there was no sign of him there either.

"Humph!" muttered the sport—as he evidently was; "don't reckon he's worse hurt than a heap-sight scare. He knows the ropes around here, and like as not he's slid on down the gulch and is making for Gold Bank. Wonder what's to be done with his burro?"

He turned away from the gulch and approached the little beast, which, after its halt, had remained like a rock through the whole performance.

"It would help me out a heap if I could throw a leg over till I got to the Bank; but then, the confounded brute might be stolen, or its owner might swear I was one of the thieves who tried to hold him up. Men are mighty ungrateful, and I'm most sooner gambling on anything that goes before a man's gratitude. Get out of this, you brute!"

The burro shook its head solemnly and never stirred a foot.

"All right. Stay, then."

Without hesitation the sport went swinging down the hill, leaving the little animal to its own devices.

When he had gone a dozen paces or so he saw a figure appear on the trail a quarter of a mile below.

The burro saw it, too, and gave a joyful "ehaw," at once starting on a lively gallop, the kettles and pans banging together with noise enough for a brass band. If the sport had not stepped aside the little wretch would have tried to run him down for being in his road; and, as it was, one of the pans whacked against his head with no ungentle force.

The figure below was that of Mike Dugan, who was evidently none the worse for his adventure. He stood in the track, grasping his stick and watching keenly the movements of the man above. He did not seem altogether satisfied that he was a friend, and a little thing would have made him take to his heels without waiting for the coming burro.

The burro came rushing to him, however, and he jumped into the saddle with an agility that showed much practice. Then, feeling somewhat safer, he waited for the sport, who was striding along with a quick, long step.

"Av ye're an honest mon sthay where yez are!" shouted the Irishman, when the sport was within a few rods of him.

"Great guns, old man, if I'm honest it don't make any difference where I am; but if I'm a rogue you don't want me any nearer."

"Sure, an' av yez wor a rogue ye wouldn't stop; so, where wad be the good av ashkin' ye? Do az ye blamed plaze!"

"Well, pardner, as I chipped in to back your game up there, it strikes me you oughtn't to be so doubtful, but if you are in a hurry to get to Gold Bank you better ride on. You can strike it before sundown if you don't waste much time along the road. I'll be there a little later."

"Thanks. Oi say that it's ye, yersilf, an' Oi'm not onmindful av yer jinerosity up thar. The baste won't carry double, but ave yere in a hurry Oi wouldn't moind to shpell an' shpell to roide till we git there. It's twice az fast we'd get over the ground, 'spechully av yez lit me go fourst."

"I'm afraid it wouldn't help much, and I'm in no particular hurry, anyhow—unless I can get something better

than that. All I wanted to ask was, how did that little teaparty up there come to start anyhow?"

"Av yer goin' to Gold Bank Oi'll till yez all about it to-morry. Oi haven't seen Bridget fur a year, an' av she's the same owld girrl Oi'm afther thinkin' Oi had betther get there be daylight. Oi'll say betther how to dodge whin the flatirons begins to sail."

"All right. Trot on," said the sport, with a light laugh. "I'll see you later, and if they start a necktie party when you strike the town it may be as well for me not to be there."

"Och, sure, an' that owld time non-sinse wor all over an' done wid. Oi'm tin toimes more afeared av Bridget than dhe town, but av Oi brace up I guiss Oi can sthand it till Oi can git her soothed a troifle."

Michael appeared to be really in earnest, and the sport did not try to detain him. A few words more between them and the Irishman began to work his stick, the burro began to gallop, and the sport to stride along alone on the trail.

The pace was lively, and the burro kept it up. The sun was not yet down when Mike came sailing into Gold Bank.

He had to pass through the town to reach his old home, and, worst of all, he had to pass the Blazing Star Saloon. The gang there would be out in front at that hour, and if they did not know his explanation there might be trouble.

Sure enough, the gang was there, and as he came in close range he was greeted with a savage yell.

CHAPTER V.

CANADA CHESS AND HIS MERRYMAKING.

Michael was not deaf, and understood the nature of that shout well enough; so he looked neither to the right hand nor the left, but covertly gave the burro a gentle reminder with his heel.

If it could possibly be done, he meant to jog on through town, and strike straight for Poverty Gulch.

He knew his own failings well enough, and that if he once got to drinking with the boys he would be apt to return to Bridget empty-handed—which would make his reception all the warmer, yet all the less cordial.

Just now he had money in his pocket, and after all the risks he had undergone to save it from the outlaws he did not, in cold blood, propose to throw it away with the Gold Bank sports.

And then, though at a distance it had seemed a simpler matter, he was not now so anxious to begin the explanation of the mistake made something like a year before.

He had overlooked the fact that though the missing man was known to be now at Walnut Bar he might not again have been heard of here, and he doubted if there could be a committee found who would be public-spirited enough to make the hundred-mile journey for the satisfaction of the camp.

It would be easier to hang Michael now, and look after the truth of his story when there was more leisure.

Canada Chess sat at one end of the porch.

He was the acknowledged king-pin of Gold Bank sports, and a man who was something of a problem.

When he made his appearance there, a couple of years previous to the return of Dugan, his plug hat and "biled shirt" had been particularly obnoxious to the local lights of the sporting fraternity, who had called him down without much delay.

The result was one of the legends of the camp.

In the face of knives, pistols, and the muscle of a dozen men as muscular as himself, he had just cleaned out the Blazing Star, without ever drawing a weapon.

There were a dozen spots on him when it was all over, to show where blood had been drawn, and they were pretty big spots, some of them; but on the other side there were more broken

bones than he seemed to have in his system.

When he got through he turned to the few spectators who had kept out of the fracas, and as he turned his hands filled as if by magic.

"That's all been a bit ov foolin' ter git acquainted. Ef thar's ary more ov it you'll find business, with a great big B. You hear me, say?"

He threw up his hand with a jaunty movement, and, without seeming to take aim, knocked the cigar out of the mouth of Breeze Hackly, the genteel sport who ran the Star.

"No offense, Hackly," he added, calmly, as, for the first time, the hand of the proprietor dropped to his revolver. "When I pull trigger I know to a hair whar my lead's goin', an' I war only showin' how ther thing kin be done."

From that time on Chess Carter was the acknowledged chief of the camp, and went on his way after his own sweet will.

He it was who had the first glimpse of the returned prodigal, as the burro ambled slowly down the main street of the town.

"Kin I b'lieve me eyes?" he exclaimed, with a wave of his hand toward the pair.

"Ef you can't, we kin," answered Heavy Hank, a man who professed to be a mine owner, though his claims were barren, except when he put the "salt" in which he hoped would catch a tenderfoot.

"Old frien', is he?"

"Friend, nothing. It's that blamed Irishman that skipped the camp a year ago, and left a widder an' a flock ov kids up Poverty Gulch."

"By ther same token, I owe her \$5 fur washin'."

"In course, yer would ef she'd trust yer. But that's ther galoot; an' et looks ez though he war comin' back in disguise. Wonder ef he knows?"

"Knows what?"

"Thet ther tenderfoot we war gunnin' fur him about war 'live an' kickin' all ther time?"

"Don't make so much dif' 'bout that, but does ther boys know et? Ef not, thar may be a circus."

"May ez well hev a circus, anyhow. Jest a leetle fun with Mickey, ter ruffle up ther fur, but not go funder than skin deep."

"Say, thar, mister man, halt!"

Dugan was almost opposite to the little group, and if he could have had his own way would not have halted a bit.

His heel dug into the off side of his burro at a lively rate, and if his stick had not been in his left hand, where it was in plain view from the Blazing Star, it would have been banging away regardless of the pans.

"Whoap, Jimmy! Howld yer whist a minit till Oi says phat the jontilmin wants."

Mike shouted loud enough to be heard at the other end of the town, and appeared to be tugging at the reins with all his might; but his right heel was getting in its work heavier than ever.

"You've had fair warnin', you bloody murderer. Now, down yer goes!"

Chess raised from his seat, revolver in hand, and appeared to be taking careful aim. As the smoke drifted away from the muzzle of his weapon he uttered a snort of disgust.

He had not aimed at the man, but at the neck of the burro, and he had intended to bring the latter down by a "crease."

For once his aim had not proved exactly true; the shot was not wasted, but it was a trifle high, and it stung, without stunning, just cutting through the cuticle.

At that, Jimmy stopped in earnest, and proceeded to buck most outrageously. He rocked backward and forward like a ship in a storm at sea, now his front feet in the air, and now his hindquarters. Mike Dugan had seen considerable of the ways and works of the burro, but this was a revelation.

The pans and kettles had, as he

thought, been secured to stay, but they began to fly, and at the same time the gang on the porch followed Chess Carter's lead and began to shoot.

"Hands up, thar, you bloody murderer!" yelled Chess again.

"Ther camp sees yer, an' ther camp means ter have yer. You wouldn't take hemp, so hyer goes for cold lead."

Mike's hands didn't go up, and the lead continued to fly—but it was at the tinware. When a pan flew into the air a bullet found it; when a skillet broke loose from the string there was a hole in it before it touched the ground.

"Arrah, now," gasped Mike; "it's a moighty soight av fun yez wor havin', but joost lit me at yez wid me shtick an' it's the 'ither way it'll be."

And by this time Mike had caught on to the fact that it was fun they were after, and that was what made him all the madder, seeing that in the process his stock in trade, which he expected to show with such pride to Bridget and the children, was rapidly vanishing—so far as practical purposes went. What was the good of a stewpan with a hole in it?

Half a dozen sixes, going as fast as fingers could work the triggers, would soon finish up the job. He could see that the rattle of firearms was alarming the town, and people were beginning to run thither from every direction, except from the side opposite to the Blazing Star. When the mob had fairly got under way there was no telling what would happen.

And still "whang, whang, whang" sounded the bullets among the pans, while Jimmy, though in constant motion, never moved a yard from the spot where he first came to anchor.

If Mike had been trying to stick on he would probably have been flung long ago; but, as he paid no attention to the gyrations of the animal, instinct did the work for him, and he swayed back and forth as though part of the burro.

This thing might have gone on indefinitely had not a shot, whether by extra skill or total want of it, cut the strap which was the main article in binding on the load of ware.

Everything went by the deck with a rush, and at almost the same instant Jimmy changed his tactics and gave a prodigious bound forward.

The result was he shot out from under the Irishman and left him sitting all in a heap on his remaining belongings.

No sooner had the crash come than Michael was up, in a red wrath, and bounding toward the porch of the Blazing Star, flourishing his shillalah.

"Oi'll have wan whack at yez, av it kills me!" he yelled. "Shure, an' ye've rooined Bridget an' dhe childer."

It looked as though he meant it; but, just as he struck the walk in front of the saloon, a woman darted from the crowd which had collected, and, extending two brawny arms, seized him by the shoulders.

"Och, ye thafe av the worruld, an' is it the loikes av a roon-away loike you wad shpake av Bridget an' dhe childer? Phere have yez been, ye omadhawn, l'avin' yer own lawful widdy ter shtarve?"

Bridget was there to speak for herself!

CHAPTER VI.

BRIDGET AND THE CHILDER.

The recognition was mutual, and there was a burst of laughter from the crowd as Mike came up, as the sailors would say, with every sheet shivering in the wind.

The parties on the porch were for the time forgotten.

"Whisht, now, Bridget, darlint! Don't lit dhe neighbors say dhe exprisshun av yer affickshun. Wait till we rache dhe shanty in dhe goolch."

"Harken to dhe writch! Talkin' av affection, an' me slavin' for a year over dhe wash toob to support meself an' dhe childer. Oi'll affict yez—wid dhe butt ind av dhe broom."

"But, Bridget, darlint, av Oi had stayed it wad have been wid a rope round me neck, an' me to dhe end av a limb, widout a chance to come back. Dhe worruk wad have been dhe same. But now, Oi'm here, wid a foine shtock av—och! bloody murther! but dhe boyes have wrecked that same shtock, an' Oi'm a poor man afther all, ochone, ochone!"

"It's a poor mon yez always wor, an' it's a poor mon yez always will be. Wid dhe chances ye've had, it's rowlin' in wealth many a mon wad be; but av yez kim back for good it's to worruk you'll go in dhe mornin', av it's to hilp wid dhe washin'; so put that in yer poipe an' smoke it."

"For dhe blessing privilege av Bridget an' dhe childer it's worrse Oi would be afther doin'. An' sure, Bridget, it's not altogether a pauper that yer own Michael comes back. There's silver in that, an' a desp'rit toime Oi had defendin' it. Take it an' we'll be happy."

Bridget had shown an increasing scale of anger, and her husband had not forgotten the signs he had known of old.

Just in time he thrust into her hand a buckskin bag which had a fair weight to recommend it, and by the low jingle it was not hard to tell that it contained coin, as he had said.

Bridget's voice softened.

"Sure, an' that's more loike dhe thing. But, Micky, b'y, av ye gives me that to-night ye naden't be afther countin' on havin' it back in dhe mornin'."

"Niver wanst, me rose av Limerick! Ivery dollar av it wor made for ye to spind at yer own swate pleasure. Kape it, an' wilcime, an' there'll be more comin' av dhe same sort."

The crowd had watched the meeting in amusement, and at one time had hopes of a pitched battle. Now that the reconciliation seemed complete and final, it began to drift away, save here and there one who lingered to shake hands with Michael for the sake of old times.

"And, Mickey, we're all glad ter see yer back, and willin' ter pay fur ther fun we've bin havin'. Give us an offer for the whole stock, lock, an' barrel, an' mebbe you won't be ther looser."

It was Cress Carter who chipped into the conversation, and Mickey answered promptly:

"That's dhe way to talk it. Yer white, Chess, an' shport clane through. It's twinty dollars dhe lot wor worth to me by dhe retail, an' tin dollars it cost me. Shplit dhe difference an' Oi'll lave yez to settle wid Jimmy for dhe rist."

"And who's Jimmy?"

"Dhe burro, av coourse."

"All right. When Jimmy gets ready ter talk, I'll listen to him. Fur yerself, twenty goes, and the boys'll all chip in. Here, you that had a hand in, ante up! There's my little five spot ter open with."

Carter turned to the balance of the shooters, hat in hand. He knew the condition of their finances, and was pretty certain that what he ordered would go without saying.

Without hesitation, man after man threw in his contribution, and as most of them were flush, it was not long before there was twenty in the hat, and the tide still rising.

The sports of Gold Bank might be a hard crowd, but in a case like this there was nothing mean about them.

When the contributions were finally handed to the Irishman he was better off than before the evening diversions had begun.

He had realized as much as he would have made in selling the whole lot, and had his stock in hand.

That is, it lay where it had been dumped, and no one else seemed to think of having a claim to it.

"Hyer's yer coin!" and Chess handed it over.

"An' there's yer tinware," responded Mike, pointing to the street.

"Guess yer that much ahead. We're not fam'ly men ourselves, an' we'll scassly keer ter keep 'em 'round tell we go ter house keepin'."

"Thin, put 'em in dhe Shtar, an' lit

Misther Hackly giv 'em out wid dhe dhrinks, dhe same as a chromo loike."

There was a laugh at the idea, and Chess suggested that a tin pan with a hole in it was worse than no tin pan at all.

"And dhat's dhe beauty av the thing. Oi couldn't sill a pan wid a howl in it; but I can mind dhe howl for five cints, an' thin it'll be good as new. It's dhe tools Oi carry for dhe trade, an' Oi'll opin me shop in Gold Bank in dhe mornin'."

"Oh, Mike, but you are fly. First you make the camp pay for spoiling yer ware; an' now yer wants ter tax 'em fur makin' it good ez new. It's no slouch ov a game, an' by ther holy tiger, it's goin ter work, too. Gather 'em up, boys, gather 'em up."

Dugan, having got things into such a comfortable condition, looked around for the burro.

He had not gone far.

The little racket in front of the Blazing Star was hardly enough to waken a respectable Western donkey to the fact of the existence of civilization.

His sudden bolt was only intended to be temporary in its effects, and, long before Bridget had been brought to terms, he was contentedly nibbling at the grass which grew by the streetside.

"Kim along wid me, Jimmy," said Mike, as he caught him by the bridle.

"Sure, an' av ye would say a wurrud to Mr. Carson it's a handful av corn, er a whisp of hay, he moight be given yez. Av yer too proud to do that it's to dhe post Oi'll be afther tyin' yez till Oi kin have a look 'round dhe town."

Probably it was by chance the burro looked in the direction of Chess Carter, but he only shook his head and abstractedly finished the mastication of a mouthful of grass.

He certainly never said a word.

"That lets me out," laughed Chess, who was still keeping an eye on the Irishman.

"For dhe prisint; but Jimmy is awful sly. Dere's no tellin' whin he'll break out."

Mike was in a good humor now, and could afford to jest. At the suggestion of some one he led the animal to the rear of the Star, and made him fast to the post which had been placed there for the accommodation of Breeze Hackly's broncho, but which was not in use at the present time.

"An' now dhin, Bridget, av ye'll get dhe supper riddy, Oi'll be dhere in a twinklin', but Oi must f'oorst dhrink to the hilt av dhe byes."

At another time Bridget might have demurred, especially when Mike's pockets were so well lined. But, after the splendid way in which the sports at the Blazing Star had settled for their amusement, she knew it would never do for him to leave at once.

"Sure, an' Oi'll joost go to dhe shtore for a can av bafe, an' a few p'raties. Av yer not riddy dhin, Oi'll go on up dhe goolch, an' ye can come whin y'er riddy."

A score or more of men ranged up to the bar at the invitation of Michael.

"Sit 'em up for dhe house!" demanded the Irishman; "an remember, ache mon are to take dhe chromo home wid him. It's no dishrespiet Oi'm allowin' to me own free gift."

There was much laughing as Hackly handed to each, as he filled up, a "chromo" from the stock on the bar.

Everybody accepted the situation, while thinking that it was doubtful if the gift would get much further on the way home than the centre of the street.

"An', now, min', Oi must show meself to dhe rist av dhe town, an' thin hooray for home. Oi'll be riddy wid yez in dhe mornin', to make dhe pans as good as new, at foive cints a howl. Wan more round, Hackly; an' whoile yer all dhrinkin' Oi'll make me shtart."

It was not a bad scheme, on the part of Dugan. It saved him from being the head of a procession, for he slipped away while they were filling their glasses, having first tossed the coin for the set-up to Hackly.

CHAPTER VII.

A SINGULAR AFFAIR.

By this time the lamps had been lighted, and the real business of the evening was ready to begin.

The return of the prodigal had furnished a good deal of amusement, but the edge had been taken off their spirits, and the loungers were beginning to discuss other things, when a noise without attracted every ear.

"Help!"

The smothered cry sounded plainly above the hum of voices, and brought an instant hush on the house.

"Help! Save me! Murder!"

Clearly, distinctly, arose the cry, and then, to the listening ears came a floundering noise, which seemed to betoken a struggle for life going on just outside, in the rear of the saloon.

"Ett's a murder!" whispered Breeze Hackly, so sharply that every one heard him.

"An' ett's a woman, at that. Out, boys, an' save her!"

The delay had been but trifling, and the words had been spoken in a lull of the noise outside. As a gurgling groan came in, every man rose to his feet. Then followed a rush for the door.

In another instant the saloon was empty of every one save a solitary bartender, and two men gathering up their stakes from a poker table.

As there was but one door to the Blazing Star, the exit had to be made by the front, and there was a regular jam, which, at another time, would have given grounds for half a dozen shooting scrapes, to say nothing of the war of words which would have followed.

No one knew exactly how the deadlock was broken. All they were aware of was that in some way the crowd got out in a bunch and shot around the corner of the building, attracted by the sounds which now arose still more plainly on the night air.

Chess was in the lead, his revolvers in his hands, and he was a sport who feared nothing, and day or night shot plumb centre. Those who were dropping in the rear expected to hear his pistols talk before they could get a view of what was going on.

"Help!" again shouted the feminine voice already heard; and then for an instant there was perfect silence.

After that came—a roar.

It was partly of amusement, but more of indignation.

"What is it? What is it?" panted the gamblers, coming up last of all.

"Dog-goned ef et ain't Mike Dugan's burro got tangled in its halter. Ther blamed leetle runt are at ther last gasp. Whar's Mike?"

That was what was the matter, evidently.

Chess Carter thrust away his revolvers, and with a stroke of his knife released the poor brute, which lay quiet, save for its quick though subdued breathing.

"An' that's what's the matter?"

"That's what ailed the mule!"

"Ha, ha, hah!"

From a state of intense excitement the crowd had a rapid passage into a hilarious mood. They gathered around the burro, laughing and talking, asking a dozen foolish questions, and there was a louder shout than ever when some one suggested they should take the animal in and stand treat.

"Say, why wouldn't it be as well fur the measly leetle cuss ter set 'em up fur us?" asked some one, whilst, immediately following, Canada Chess broke in with an amendment which tickled the crowd most of all.

"Say, what's ther matter with Mike settin' 'em up again fur him?"

There had already been divers calls for Mike, but at this he was shouted for more than ever. It seemed as though he could not help hearing if he was anywhere within a mile.

Mike did not answer, but the burro did.

It floundered around a little, rose to

its feet with a grunt, gazed calmly at the circle which showed black in the evening air, and then lifted up its voice and—wept.

At least, it thrust its nose up in the air and began to bray vigorously.

"He's callin' fur Mike, an' you bet that'll fetch him. Look a little out, fur when he comes, it'll be a 'hoopin'."

Sure enough; they could hear the hasty fall of feet running up the street, and almost immediately Michael burst into the crowd.

"Arrah, now, an' phat w'ad yez be afther doin' here? The mon phat touches Jimmy'll git a poult wid me shtick."

As he spoke Mike looked around suspiciously, and it was just as well for the peace of the town that no one was within arm's length of the burro.

"Ef that's all ther thanks we gits, we might ez well let ther blamed leetle rip hang etself ter death. Say, Mike, it war a close call, an' we took ther choice fur ye betwixt a dead burro an' a cut rope. Thar's yer donkey, 'live an' kick-in.' What yer goin' ter say to ther crowd?"

A little explanation was sufficient to show the Irishman the meaning of all this, and he appeared to be overjoyed at the rescue.

"Sure, an' Jimmy shan't say Oi heven't done me juty. Kim into dhe Blazin' Star an' dhrink wid Jimmy an me to ther mon what cut dhe rope."

Mike had been drinking himself, but he was not so far gone that he did not know what he was doing, and the invitation was too good a one to be slighted. While he spoke he was engaged in once more tying the burro; and this time he took good care there should be no danger of its getting a foot over the halter rope.

When that little job was completed he led the way into the saloon, and the crowd followed as unanimously as it had bolted out. Dugan threw down a big, round gold piece as he ordered the drinks up for the house.

"Here's good health to Jimmy and me!" he exclaimed as the crowd raised their filled glasses.

The toast would have gone down without another word if it had not been for Canada Chess, who suddenly held up his hand.

"By ther jumpin' jack ov Jherico, boyees, thar's s'uthin' strange 'bout this hyar thing that we ain't told Mike yit. Dog-gone my tail feather ef I ever heered ther like ov it afore, either. It'll make Mike crawl all over when he hears it."

"Phat's that?"

Dugan spoke grumly, for he thought Chess intended to make game of him in some way.

"Why, true ez I'm standin' hyer, that blamed old burro talked."

"Och, come away wid ye! Phat nonsense wor ye afther givin' us now?"

"True ez preachin'. He jest yelled bloody murder till the gang ran out. Wasn't it so, boyees? What in high blazes is the meanin' ov it?"

It was a fact that the crowd had actually forgotten all about the cries for help which had been so plainly heard until Chess reminded them. Then they looked around queerly, and a sort of hush fell on the assembly.

"That's so, what Chess are tellin' ov us. I heered it plain ez yer pleases."

"True ez yer lives, he war callin' ov us fur help like a white-head, an' when we got out thar war no one else in sight what could a bin a-doin' ov it."

Corroborative evidence began to chime in.

At first Mike believed it was all part of a prearranged plot, but he soon began to think that if this was acting, it was very well done. Two or three men were evidently scared half out of their wits, and they were not men who could make believe in a way so true to life.

First one, and then another, with convincing oaths, testified to the truth of this strange thing, until Dugan himself began to doubt.

"Will, don't shtand wid good liquor in

yer fists, shtarin' loike a pack av fools! Down wid it, min, an' av yez belaves anything av dhe koind, Oi'll bring in Jimmy hisselt, to till yez it worn't so."

The proposition hit the fancy of the crowd.

Those who had already emptied their tumblers slyly filled them up again before placing them with the other empty ones on the bar, and Mike, being two or three ahead of the rest, swaggered out of the door, twirling his "switch."

The Irishman was gone but a few minutes. Then they heard him returning; and presently through the door came the two. And as they passed the threshold the animal slowly got up on its hind feet, and waddled towards the bar. But, most wonderful of all, as it went it gave a glance and a nod all around, and broke out with:

"Howd'y, kids. I'se glad ter see yer hyer."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BABBLING BURRO.

At the unexpected salutation there was a roar, while Mike fell back in horror. Such a thing was to him worse than a miracle, and he was not sure it did not mean death on the spot.

To add to his perplexity, he was met with a charge which finished the work of throwing him all abroad.

"Oh, say, now, Mike! That's too thin. Yer doin' that sort of jabber yerself, an' playin' ett off on this hyer camp ez ther pure thing. Let up on it, Mike, er thar'll be trouble."

"'Pon me sowl to glory, min, it's breakin' out in a new place Jimmy is, ontoirely. Oi knows nothin' more av it than dhe choild onborn. It's Satan's silf phat's in dhe gossoon."

He looked doubtfully after the burro, and was evidently afraid to follow it.

Meantime, Jimmy had kept waddling ahead on its hind feet, until it reached the bar, where it stood with its front hoofs planted on the top of the bar.

At the exclamation of his owner, he turned his head back over one shoulder.

Did his lips move, or was it only imagination?

Quite distinctly came back the words: "Hark to dhe liar! It's not a word he don't till me how to say. Sure, an' it's two o' us that's haunted."

It was a fair imitation, if it was not the voice of Mike himself; and the Irishman, at the charge, was more bewildered than ever. At the same time the laugh which arose stirred up his anger mightily. He danced swiftly forward, and gave the burro a sudden whack with his stick, which brought Jimmy down upon all fours.

"You'll play the divil, will yez? Take that, an' that, an' that!"

He showered the blows in on the unlucky animal, without much regard to where they fell, or how they would be received.

Jimmy took one or two of them without flinching, but when they continued to come in, hot and heavy, it was more than he could stand.

Suddenly, he lashed out both heels, catching Mike in the breast, and leveling him to the floor. Then he bolted to the door, casting back after him as he went:

"Take that for the fool ye are, an' not another worrud will ye git out av me tell ye do the square thing."

The burro did not stop when it reached the outside, but they could hear its hoofs clattering along toward the gulch. Mike was elected to go home on foot.

"Reckon that lets Mike out," said Chess Carter, looking around as if in search of confirmation.

"Now, ther question are, who's settin' up this sort ov a game on us. It's dead sure ther donkey don't talk hisselt."

There was no answer to his question or to his inquiring gaze. Whether the thing was possible or not, they had the evidence of their own senses—and a large majority of them were willing to take it and swear that Jimmy really had talked.

"Are ther a stranger in camp?"

"Nary stranger!"

A look at the faces surrounding him showed no unfamiliar countenance, and there was no one there who was capable of putting up the joke on the town.

For the time, at least, the thing was going to remain a mystery. The one fact remained, that the burro had talked.

Mike got up and gazed about in a dazed, uncertain fashion.

He had owned Jimmy for nearly a year, and nothing of this kind had ever happened before. He was puzzled; and it looked to him as though the crowd was more puzzled still. He had not a word to say, and without even another drink, started out, unmindful of several calls which were made for him to stop and talk the matter over.

As he went out of the door it would have been hard to tell what were his thoughts.

It seemed to him as though he must find Jimmy, and yet, at the same time, he had a holy horror of doing it.

After he was gone tongues buzzed freely at the Blazing Star, and in one corner Chess Carter and several others were gathered, holding a low-voiced consultation.

"Say, Mike ain't in ter this thing, on ther ground floor. We got ter look fur some 'un else; an' whar ter look's ther myst'ry. Thar ain't bin no stranger in town ez could a sot up ther job. Hev yer seen ary strangers 'round camp ter-day?"

"Nary stranger."

"We got ter look fur one, then, fur he's hyer. Thar ain't no man in this hyer camp ez kin make Jimmy talk—an' talk like he did. That last are what makes me sick. Some 'un hez got onto ther game."

"I didn't see nothin' ter make me think that. He war jest a mockin' Mike. What's that got ter do with war?"

"It ain't what he said in hyer—it war ther send off what made me run cold."

"What war that?"

"Didn't yer hear what he said, an' how he said it? 'Help! murder! save me!' An' it war a woman's voice."

"That's so. Mebbe it war a warnin'?"

"Warnin' nothin'! I tell yer, some 'un's on ter ther game, an' we got ter know who it are. You bet he'll hev ter go outer the wet afore we git down to ther real biz."

"An' who yer think it is?"

"How can I tell? All I know are thet it's some 'un ez don't b'long hyerabouts."

"Say. I seen a strange boy out nigh ther dam terday; but he war trampin' t'other way. It couldn't a bin him."

"Boy be hanged! It war a full growed man. Boys ain't monkeyin' with the pards ov Gold Bank. We got ter find him an' slit his throttle, er else jump cur game."

"An' thar's too big money in it ter do that last."

"Right you are; ter say nothin' ov ther twenty apiece we got in advance. It would puzzle ther gang ter pay back ther coin—an' go wuss ner pullin' teeth ef it could be did."

"We ain't a doin' it. An', say! Look thar. Hyer's a strange galoot now."

The one man who sat with his face toward the door was keeping a sharp lookout on what was going on in the room. At his warning the rest looked around, and, sure enough, there was the stranger.

He looked as though he might be the very person they were talking about.

Of medium height, and gracefully, rather than stoutly, built, his motions were sinuous as those of a panther, and he moved toward the bar with a noiseless, springy step, never turning his head to one side or the other, though his glittering black eyes, roving around, seemed to take in every face there.

There was no sign of a weapon about his person, yet there was a touch-me-not air which would have warned one accustomed to the cold-nerved sports of the West that he was a man whom it would be well to handle delicately.

"Awful blazes!" gritted Chess Carter between his clenched teeth.

"It's Soft Velvet, the man from Sandrock. When he strikes a camp something always breaks. What's he come ter Gold Bank fur?"

"Say, Canader, you ain't takin' water, be ye? He ain't puttin' yer onder cow?"

Heavy Hank asked the questions with incautious frankness, and he drew back in genuine alarm as the man from the Dominion turned on him savagely.

"Chess Carter never took water for ary man, an' he'd be apt ter drop ther one ez says he did. But, he gives yer fair warnin' thar's a hand that's allers harder beat, an' it's ther one Soft Velvet holds. If yer hez ther chance, down him afore he throws around fur deal."

"We sabbe! Nuff said! Hark ter what he's sayin'."

The stranger had turned at the bar, and stood facing the crowd.

He pushed the brim of his hat up, and a little back, as he carelessly surveyed them all.

Then, in a voice that was gentle as a spring morning, he spoke:

"Gents, all, I'm not here to crowd Gold Bank beyond the limit, but I understand there's a sport called Canada Chess camped somewhere near the Blazing Star, even if he's not right on deck. He's the galoot I'm after, and if anybody sees him, he can tell him I'm a-looking for him."

As he finished speaking, Canada Chess himself stepped forward, and halted in front of the stranger, and but a few paces away, while, with folded arms, he looked him over, speaking as he looked:

"You say, stranger, yer lookin' fur Canada Chess. Good enough, fur I'm yer man."

CHAPTER IX.

MODERN WITCHCRAFT.

Mike Dugan went out into the night air somewhat bewildered.

He had taken a number of drinks since coming into town, though not enough to badly upset him under ordinary circumstances.

But there was the mystery of the babbling burro to confuse him, and the fact that the same donkey, after a year of good behavior, had suddenly turned on him and kicked the breath out of his body.

At first he was too angry to think much of anything but the personal affront and injury.

It seemed pretty sure that he would have to limp out the trail, and up the gulch, all the way home.

If he did, he vowed that Jimmy would catch it when he got him, for he knew the animal would not wander far, and could easily be found in the morning. But Mike was not the sort of a man who could go on nursing his wrath. He was soon hot, and soon cold. Before he had gone half a mile his head had cleared wonderfully, and he began to think of what might be behind it all.

It was a little hard to believe, in the first place, that Jimmy would ever allow himself to get tangled up in his halter so that he was in danger of strangulation. Dugan would have sworn, a little while ago, that such a thing was impossible. There must have been some witchcraft about it.

And then the burro began to talk.

That was it. The donkey was bewitched!

In spite of many irregularities, Mike was at heart a devout Christian, and at the thought of what had happened, and what might follow, he breathed a prayer or two, and called upon Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to protect the bed on which he lay.

That gave him some little strength, and he stumbled on to the gulch, swinging his stick, and muttering to himself.

But right there he saw a sight which gladdened his eyes. There was light enough for him to see a restive little shadow, which he recognized in an instant.

Jimmy was there, tied to a bush.

"Tare an' hounds, but it's Jimmy, himself! Ye bluddy little shpalpeen, it's out av yer hoide Oi'll be takin' it now. Be rididy phor a gran' batin'!"

The burro heard the threat, and no doubt caught a glimpse of the shadow of the Irishman as he stumbled forward. What he thought is not on record, but up went his nose, and he broke out into a plaintive, long-drawn "Eee-haw!"

"Ye'd wape, wad ye? An' ye, the babbling burro, thet's brung shame on dhe kindest mon phat iver owned a jack. Talk, wad yez—Oi'll make yez howl!"

Mike's stick was up in the air, but it did not fall. On the contrary, Dugan nearly fell himself. He staggered back gasping. The burro had laid back its ears, lowered its head, and shouted:

"Kape away from me, ye Oirish, bog-trottin' thafe of dhe worruld! Touch me wid dhe switch an' Oi'll give it to yez in dhe gob."

"Howly mither av Mose! He's at it agin'! The loikes av a talkin' burro wor niver heard av afore. Oi'm a doomed mon."

"Ye loie, ye baste!"

At that Mike did sink down. The whisky had all evaporated, and there was nothing left but superstition.

"Wirra, wirra, but it's dhe banshee Oi hear a callin', an' me toime has come," he moaned.

"Banshee be hanged, old man, it's nothin' but a blame old burro!"

Another voice spoke up, right behind him, and this was a jolly, boyish one, the owner of which could hardly speak for the silent laughter which was struggling to break out into a hearty peal.

"Get up, man, and take the thing by the halter. I'll vouch for it the brute gives you no more trouble. You must be jolly drunk."

"Sure, an' av it's dhrunk Oi am, it's wid shurproise and bewitchery. Whin Moike Dugan shtops short av tin dhrinks, its sober he is, himself, ez a booby owl at Christmas."

"Then, what are you mooning around here for? It's not the place to be saying your prayers; and as for the other thing, you could swear a good deal more comfortably at the shack up the gulch."

"But dhe brute towld me Oi loied, an' it wanted to hang itself. Sure, an' Beelzebub wor in it. Av ye luv me, shoot him where he shtands."

"And to-morrow morning, when you are sober again, have you on the war-path."

"Niver. Av yez won't shoot him, take me shtick an' belt him wan phor good luck."

"Excuse me, but the donkey hasn't done anything to suffer for. It is all your imagination. The boys at Gold Bank set up a job on you, and you were just too drunk to see through a ladder, so you tumbled into the trap."

It was a little risky talking this way to Mike, even though it was in a laughing tone. He was not fond of being joked at, though he was at times willing to be joked with.

It had the effect intended, however.

Dugan was aroused from the superstitious depths into which he had fallen, and was willing to argue.

"Sure, an' av Oi thought that, Oi wad be afther goin' back an' clanin' out dhe Shtar wid me shtick."

"No. You are going to crawl right onto Jimmy's back, and test this matter by going home. If he don't move like a lamb, and if he has a word to say that I can hear, I'll agree to go back with you and see the fun."

"An' who moight you be?"

"Oh, that's neither here nor there, though I'm not ashamed of my name. For short, it is Hal Keene."

"Thin, Hal Keene, phat wad yez be afther wantin' wid me? Oi can say there's somethin' in dhe wind."

"Good for you, Michael. Your head is beginning to clear up wonderfully well. I do want to talk with you, and that is a fact."

"Sure, an' ain't that phat ye've bin a doin' phor the last tin minnits?"

"Yes, but I don't want to talk in just that way; and I want to talk where I can be sure there are no lurkers to take us unawares. I guess up at your shanty will be as good a spot as any. Hop on, and be convinced that Satan's not in your burro, after all."

Hal Keene, as the lad called himself, had been deliberately unfastening the burro, and now led him up to his master.

With a sudden accession of courage, Mike sprung on the back of the beast and clapped his heels to his sides.

The animal never uttered a protest, but went off at a sedate walk, while Keene strolled along by his side.

It did not take them long to reach the dwelling place of the Irishman; and here the burro was unsaddled and turned loose. He kicked up his heels and ran away in what seemed to be high glee, but never a word did he speak. Mike was satisfied that if there had been any witchcraft about him it was over for the present, at least.

"Now, thin, they can't come widin tin rods av us widout roustin' out dhe dogs. Dhrive on wid your discoorse."

Mike's tones were tinged with suspicion. Perhaps he had a sort of lurking thought that this was the magician who was responsible for the vagaries of the burro.

He faced the lad, whose face was fairly well revealed in the moonlight, and scanned him narrowly.

Hal Keene was a perfect stranger; of that he was certain from the outset.

Moreover, he did not look as though he could be a resident of the vicinity of Gold Bank.

He had a fresh, bright face, his hair was well cared for, and his clothing seemed better adapted to a country which was not quite so wild and woolly.

Nevertheless, no one could meet the firm glance of his eyes when they were turned in earnest on a man and for a moment doubt his courage.

"I understand that you were a friend of Halsey Horton?"

The words were spoken in the shape of an interrogative, and Mike took his own time to answer.

When he spoke it was after a minute of silence, during which, for once, the Irishman seemed in deep thought.

"Whin Oi talk about Halsey Horton it's not afther a visit to dhe Blazin' Shtar. Come ag'in in dhe mornin'."

"That is a fair opening. You know something about him, and when you talk that way, I can be sure you were his friend."

"Who towld yez Oi wor his friend?"

"Man alive! who could have told me straighter than you have just done yourself? When you are that careful, it shows you are square as they make 'em, and know what you're talking about."

"Perhaps Oi do."

"Then, not to beat about the bush, I am speaking for Halsey Horton's daughter. She is on the trail of a million. What do you know about it, and will you help her?"

CHAPTER X.

PUBLIC OPINION SOMETIMES LIES.

The question was a straightforward one, and one, too, which seemed to require a yes or no; but Mike was willing to dodge the issue.

"Halsey Horton an' me wor pards, an' shtruck bed rock together. Do Oi look az though Oi had a share in a million?"

"No; but I wouldn't wonder if you ought to have. I see that you doubt me, and that is all well enough. Let me give you a word in your ear. Perhaps it will change your feeling."

The lad leaned forward as he spoke, and whispered a word or two in conclusion.

It made a difference at once.

"Sure, an' yez have the worrud, an' av Oi trist yez it's small blame to me av Oi go wrong."

"If you mean to help in securing justice to the orphaned child of Halsey Horton you will not go wrong. Are you with her or against her?"

"Oi'm wid her, heart an' sowl! Tili me how to hilp her, an' Oi'll show yez Oi'm her fri'nd, an' the fri'nd av her fri'nd."

"Good enough! That is the way I thought, from what poor Halsey said in his letters, that Mike Dugan would speak. And first and foremost, how long is it since you saw Horton's daughter?"

"It's a matter of fifteen year, more or liss."

"She was but a child then. Do you think you would recognize her now?"

"Ricognize little Molly, it is y'er ashkin'? Faith, an' av Oi didn't it wad be a shame to dhe worruld. It's mesilf saved her loife, an' dhressed the wound dhe time av dhe ixplosion, whin Halsey wor too all br'uk up to move hand or f'ut. It's the scar wad be there shtill."

"And the scar is there; will you be able to swear to it?"

"Ivery toime."

"Good! And now, the next thing is to find her. In that I want to have your help."

"It's yours an' wilcome; but av yez has succiss it will be more than Oi had. It wor years Oi s'arched for her, an' Oi wor sure she wor did."

"And, thank providence, you were not the only one who had that same opinion. Otherwise, I suspect, she would have paid the forfeit of her life long ago."

"An' mebbe she did."

"No. At least, she was living but a few weeks ago, and came in this direction, in search of you. What may have happened since I cannot be sure, but I believe that, after all she has passed through, she will be preserved to the end, and brought to her own."

"H'ivin ghrant it! An' phere do yez think she moight be now; an' is it loike ther'll be some wan about her, thryin' to do her harrum?"

"Very like. Do you know a man here by the name of Chester Carter?"

"The thafe of the worruld! An' why wouldn't Oi?"

"Ah, you know something about him? Would he be likely to harm her? In some way he comes into the affair, though it is uncertain why! Can you tell me where to find him?"

"Sure, an' it's not always safe to wag wan's tongue about Chess. It's dhe king-pin shport he always wor, av Gowld Bank, to say nothin' av dhe Woild Cat shaft he wor owner av whin Oi wint away."

"Then he's a mining sport?"

"Oi had raysons to suspect him av bein' somethin' more, but Gowld Bank sames to regard him wid deloight, an' p'rhaps Oi'm off."

"And you are sure he is still in the camp?"

"Faith, an' didn't Oi furnish dhe illegant diversion for him an' fri'nds dhis silf-same avening? At wan toime it began to look loike bloody murder."

"And you think he is a dangerous man?"

"Av ther wor the makin' av a dollar in it she moight betther thrust to a ragin' lion."

"You are the man I most wanted to find. You know something of the inside facts, and your evidence alone might be enough to place her where she belongs. We will look for traces of Molly. If we don't find them soon, we will turn our attention to this same Chess Carter."

"Av she come here thinkin' to spake wid him, betther tourn yer attinshun to him fourst, an' last, an' all dhe toime, till she's found."

"Yes, yes. We had certain reasons to believe that he held the proof of her claim. What I am afraid of is that, through her, he may attempt to obtain the millions himself."

"Lit him alone phor dhat! Dhe wonder wor he wor not on dhe trail av thim long ago."

"I suspect he knew nothing of them until she enlightened him."

"Thrust him phor dhat. I'll bate yez he wor matin' her half way."

"Perhaps Molly believed he had the proof that Inez Morales was Halsey Hor-

ton's wife. Yet how could he know that their daughter was the heir to the Morales estates?"

"Howly saints an' blissid angels! Wad she tell him that?"

"It would be like her innocence."

"Thin, she wor doomed, from that on. Sure, an' Chess wor thick as two thaves wid Don Natan at wan toime, an' dhe Black Don wor a bloody bandit."

"Don Natan, ah! Was he a Morales?"

"Av dhe tallest koind, as Oi have raysons to know. Whin there's some little matthers av robbin', murther, revolution, or trayson—an' sure, he's little worse phor that last—an' dhe loike, are arranged phor, he wad be nixt av kin, an' dhe heir to dhe estate."

"And he and Carter were sworn friends?"

"Yez may say that same."

"Then, if she has approached him on the subject, her life was in danger."

"It's roight yez wor."

"Without a doubt. I know Natan by reputation. A greater demon never lived—or a more fortunate one. A murder more or less would be but a trifle to him, and he would take large chances in the hope that some day it might profit him."

"That wor his way, always."

"If she had only waited! I was to join her, but was delayed a few days, and when I reached the meeting place I found she had gone on to Gold Bank."

"An' she niver rached dhe town."

"No. Of that I am well aware. She has simply vanished. What has become of her?"

Mike did not answer at once. He was in deep thought.

"Sure, an' it wor by stage she wor to come, Oi'm thinkin'."

"Yes. She left Bed Rock a week ago, bound for Gold Bank."

"A week ago!"

"Yes. It was on the stage which left Bed Rock on Tuesday."

"An' dat wor dhe toime Lame Johnny dhrove in wid dhe hearse empty."

"Lame Johnny?"

"Yis. He wor dhrovin' on dhe route."

"Then we must find him. I understood the name of the driver was Stoa—Charley Stoa."

"But Johnny driv that trp—an' he kim in wid dhe hearse empty. D'yez moind now?"

"Then, by heavens! it looks as though he had a hand in it. If he did—it will be bad for Johnny."

"Whin yez finds him. Sure, an' he's shkip'd dhe camp, bag an' baggidge. Av ther wor a plot he wor in it. Moinde yez, Oi've bin away frum dhe camp fur a year; but Oi wor at Bed Rock mesilf, an' wor ashkin' questions about dhe Bank, an' dhe byes. They give me dhe news."

"Then, if we take his trail, the chance is it will lead us to Miss Horton."

"Av ye kin foind it."

"I will find it! Who here were the pards of this Lame Johnny?"

"Ye has me dhere. Oi wad say, Chess Carter for a ch'ice."

"And Chess Carter holds out at the Blazing Star as a general thing, I believe?"

"Roight yez are."

"Perhaps something can be done with him. I will see. Meantime, if you are in earnest to help me in this matter, wait for me. I will see you again in the morning, when we will begin to act. To-night I look for points in Gold Bank."

"Titch thim loightly, mon! Chess Carter wor a harrud mon from 'way back, an' av he dhrops to yer game he'll sind yez over the range."

"So much the better. I only suspect now; then, I will know. And I have been there before. I shall keep my eyes open. Only, beware yourself, that you drop no hint of what we have spoken of. Good-night!"

The conference was at an end, and Hal Keene, the Ventriloquist Detective, turned away, seeking Gold Bank.

As he glided along, he was in deep thought over what he had learned.

The disappearance of Molly Horton appeared to have been almost explained, and he was trying to lay out a campaign in accordance with his information.

No thought of possible danger had he, when, suddenly, there was the swish of a rope, and a noose settled over his neck.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BLACK DON.

The attack came so unexpectedly that Hal Keene had neither thought nor opportunity for resistance.

The loop around his neck was tightened by a practiced hand, and he was flung over backward, measuring his length on the ground in a way that went far to knock the senses out of him.

The man who flung the rope had approached him softly yet openly from behind, and now advanced coolly, and with measured step, coiling his lasso as he came, so that that he kept it taut. Had Hal been ever so desirous of making a struggle, he would have found no chance for making it successfully.

As for using the weapons in his belt—that would have been out of the question.

He made no movement, however.

It seemed as though the life had been actually snatched out of his body. When he recovered his wits a little, and stared up in a half foolish, half frightened way, his captor was holding him down with a knee on his breast, while he coolly twisted a cord around the two wrists, which had been forced together.

"Thar, ding blast yer, git up an' move," he said, hoarsely, seeing Hal's eyes were opened again, and that he was now little the worse for the attack.

"I'll jest tetch yer shoulder a bit, an' p'int out ther way yer sh'd go. An' don't monkey, sonny! I'm makin' ett ez easy as I kin, but ef yer don't play me fair, you'll git a blamed tough deal."

Hal rose to his feet in a staggering sort of way. He heard the order, but did not more than half understand it, rapidly as his brain had cleared. He was ready to argue the matter since he could not fight.

"What do you mean by this outrage?" he began.

"Jest he-old bizzniss," chuckled the man with the rope.

"That orter be ernuf. Ef it ain't, say ther word, an' I'll put ther loop on ag'in an' drag yer up to ther rack, whar you'll find ther fodder hez bin gittin' dryer an' dryer, all ther time ye war a foolin'. How'z it ter be?"

By this time Hal realized that he was positively helpless.

"Lead on, then, and I will follow," he said, sullenly.

"Mebbe you'd try, but like ez not you wouldn't keep up. We'll jest step side by side, an' then thar won't be no danger. Would be orful if yer got lost on ther trail a night like this."

He took the boy's elbow firmly as he spoke, and the two moved off side by side.

The man did not talk like an assassin. Besides, if he had meant immediate bodily harm to the boy it would have been easy enough to tighten the noose and strangle him on the spot.

For the moment Hal rather expected he would be taken directly to Gold Bank, as the start was made in that direction.

Before long, however, they left the trail to one side, and soon came upon a horse, which was tethered in a secluded spot.

"Reckon you an' I kin ride double without fightin'. Ef not—stan' from onder. We'll try ett; an' up yer goes."

The man caught the Ventriloquist Detective by shoulder and thigh, and carelessly swung him up on the shoulders of the animal, springing up behind after loosening the horse. Then they went away at a steady gallop.

For a time there was silence between the two, and finally it was the man who spoke:

"Sonny, bein' ez I kinder got yer inter this hyer mix, an' sorter feel 'sponsible, I wants ter give yer a p'inter."

"Humph! You 'p'int my head toward

Gold Bank, and turn me loose, and I'll excuse you for the balance."

"Don't be a consarned fool, sonny. The boss sent me fur ye, an' ye got ter go."

"And who is that boss?"

"Never mind. You'll find out soon ernuf. Ett's jest a hint I'm givin' yer thet when yer meets him yer don't want ter be too dog-goned fresh. He's onfortunatly one ov the killin' kind, and ef yer makes him mad he might use his knife fust, and be sorry fur ett when ett war too late."

"Then you are a cowardly scoundrel to place me in such a danger."

"That goes, sonny; that all goes. I'm ther why of ther w'ichness, and ther thus ov ther moreover. All ther same, I'm a warnin' ov yer. Talk fair, an' watch w'ich way ther wind blows, er he'll be orderin' me ter berry ther dead, an' ther corpus'll be thar."

"You couldn't give me a hint of what he may want, could you? Then I might be ready for him, and perhaps save my scalp."

"No, I couldn't. Dry up, now, er he may hear yer a talkin'. We're almost thar."

Hal Keene became silent.

He had but little doubt within himself as to where he was going.

No doubt it was to an outlaw's camp he was being taken; and there was a certain bandit who had an interest in him, as he knew, since his talk with Mike Dugan.

He could not but believe that Dan Natan has discovered his knowledge of Molly Horton's affairs, and intended in some way to turn it to his own advantage.

Nor was he mistaken in this.

Straight into the presence of a dark-faced hidalgo, clad in true Mexican style, was he taken.

"Thar's yer meat, boss; roast it keerful, fur et's kinder tender like."

The free address of the captor as he pushed his prisoner forward did not seem to be altogether agreeable to the man who sat near a blazing campfire.

He scowled darkly for a moment, without answering, and then waved his hand.

The gesture was peremptory, and, in a twinkling the two were alone together.

"I see the Roper has muzzled the little dog. It is well. He will be more apt to live longer if he cannot snap. What hast thou?"

The question was hardly put for an answer, since the man had come close to the lad, and was examining for himself.

If he expected to find anything of value he was doomed to disappointment. Hal's weapons were still at his waist, and in his pockets were a few dollars in coin, a pencil, a notebook containing a few items of no particular information or importance, and a couple of letters from agents of stage and Express companies in regard to fares and routes.

The envelopes were addressed to Mr. H. Keene, but as the lad had taken that name openly and frankly while in this country, there was nothing in his belongings which gave a clue to his business, or to any mystery which might lie behind his actions.

Hal stood the search without a gesture of dissent, or a movement which looked like either fear or anger.

The Mexican resumed his seat, and, folding his arms, looked the lad over once more.

"Sullen as the rat in the trap," he muttered to himself, and then to the prisoner:

"I am Natan Morales, the uncle of the daughter of Inez Morales, and her gringo husband, Halsey Horton. Either thou art not her friend, or thou hast gone to work the wrong way to show it. Why hast thou hidden her?"

"A pretty question to ask me. What have you and your side pard, Chess Carter, done with her? Don't forget that I am not her only friend, and if you have tried any foul play, sooner or later you will feel the halter drawing."

"Caramba! but thou hast a bold tongue! Speak up! What hast thou done with the girl, and where hast thou hidden the proofs of her birthright?"

"My friend, you are a good deal off. I don't know where Molly is, or I wouldn't be looking for her; and I have no proofs of her birthright or anything else. When you scooped me in you got a water haul, and the sooner you let me go again the bettr it will be for you, if it is true, as you say, and you are in search of both of those things."

"Look to thine own lips for truth, or that which is not. Thou art lying, and thou knowest it. The life or death of that girl is a little more to me than thou knowest, and thy hand may make mischief for me as well as for the girl. Thou hast meddled in this thing, and it would be but fair to kill thee off and be done with it, but, as there may be use for thee hereafter, thy life is for the present saved. I will question thee again, and at length. Have thy answers ready, and beware of a lie. For that thou wilt die without mercy."

He whistled shrilly as he ceased speaking, and in answer to the signal the man he had called the Roper made his appearance.

"Away with him!" said Morales, as the American came slouching forward.

"He is thy prisoner to look after. See that he is present when called for. Otherwise, thy life will be the forfeit. Take him to the cave."

CHAPTER XII.

THE ROPER LOSES HIS GRIP.

The Ventriloquist Detective was fairly puzzled.

Was Morales in earnest in what he said? Could it be possible he was on the wrong scent and the disappearance of Molly Horton was as much a mystery to the bandit as it was to him?

The Roper grinned as he looked over the prisoner, but made no answer to the order of Morales beyond a nod, which may, or may not, have been seen.

He touched Hal lightly on the elbow, and steered him out of the august presence of the chief without allowing him time for speech or much thought.

He continued silent, in fact, until Morales had been left beyond earshot and they had reached the interior of the cave which was to serve as a prison.

"Dunno about yer pluck, but y'er got a heap ov judgment," he finally chuckled, lighting a lantern as he spoke.

"You an' me hez got ter be pards fur awhile, an' et might hev saved me trouble by and by ef he hed fixed et so et wasn't jest so ter be. But I'm allers willin' fer a kid ter hev a show. You may git out alive yit."

"Why should he go out of his way to harm me? If I didn't hate to talk harshly about my elders, I'd say he had been acting like a fool. He has gone to a heap of trouble to do something that may cost him dear and can't profit him a cent."

"That's right, sonny; you can tell me all that; but don't say et ter Don Natan. You jest sed ernuf, an' mebbe you hit ther nail a hard 'un."

"I? How? It seemed to me I said nothing at all."

"You didn't say much, fer a fack; but yer hinted mighty strong; an' when he thinks et over, I wouldn't wonder ef you'd put ett in whar it'll do ther most good."

"What did I say?"

Keene was more puzzled than ever. He had no recollection of saying anything that would be apt to make the outlaw look with any favor on him.

"Jest called his 'tenshun to ther fack that Chess Carter might hev bin playin' him roots. Ef he hez, it'll be a pity fer ther man frum Canader, thet's all."

"There is no use for you to try to throw me off the scent that way. Canada Chess is but the tool of the more open villain, and they, both of them, know well enough where Miss Horton has gone to."

"So you think. All right. Jest yer go

ter sleep on that. Reckon this chinnin' ain't no good. In course, I'm bound ter keep yer hyer tell ther boss calls fer you ag'in. I'll han'le yer softly; so yer better take et easy. Ef you got down among the piruts in the camp they'd cut yer throat."

The Roper actually talked as though he was trying to befriend his captive, though, while he spoke, he was making a hitch around Hal Keene's ankles with a stout piece of rope.

He had his own safety to look after, and did not intend to run more risks than he had to, while he enjoyed, to a certain extent, his ease.

"Thar. That ain't too tight fer comfort, an' I reckon et's good ernuf fer ther 'cashun. Don't try no tricks, boy, fer I allers shoot what I can't rope."

With this warning, the man took a blanket and threw himself down directly across the opening, leaving to Hal the privilege of selecting his own position on the floor of the small cave. He could still move a little, and accordingly rolled himself into one corner, and appeared very composedly to resign himself to sleep.

He had no idea of going to sleep in reality; though the Roper did.

The latter had been having a rather hard day of it, and it seemed to him there was no reason why he should not take his rest. The boy captive had been so quiet all along, and was so securely tied, he anticipated no trouble from him.

He did manage to keep his eyes open for a time, until the low, regular breathing which came from the corner of the cell convinced him Hal was asleep.

After that—before he knew he was on the way—he was in the lands of dreams himself.

Hal was a boy who held the opinion that whatever was to be done had best be done quickly.

The longer he remained a prisoner the greater would be the danger and the harder he would find it to escape. Besides, he wanted to be at liberty to pursue his search for the missing girl. For himself, he might afford to wait; but, now that he knew Morales was acquainted with her story, he felt sure Molly needed his protection or assistance.

Of course, he kept himself very wide awake, in spite of his pretence of slumber. For a time he half thought the Roper was shamming, but no sooner was he sure that it was slumber and nothing else, than he began to try what could be done.

The ropes which bound him had been adjusted by the hands of a proficient. They were not so tightly drawn as to give him pain, but the knots appeared to be firm enough to hold.

He was careful not to make any violent efforts, which might cause his hands to swell or tighten the cords, but deliberately took his time to testing his bonds. As a result, within half an hour he had one hand entirely free, and was sedulously picking at the knots which held the rope around the wrist of the other.

From time to time he stopped his efforts, to listen.

The Roper still slept on, but he could hear voices now and then, which seemed to come from the gulch below the mouth of the cave.

If he got down there it was likely he would run against guards who would not hesitate to shoot him down, or use the knife.

He was ready at last to move; but the Roper lay in the way. He had no weapons of his own. Even if he had he would not have been willing to murder a sleeping man unless his own life was in the utmost jeopardy. How was he to be rid of him?

While he considered the question the sleeper awoke. He rolled over lazily and took a glance at the boy, who immediately had taken his old position, and seemed to be in the very deepest depths of slumber.

Then he gathered himself up, as though not more than half awake, and stared out into the darkness.

Quite distinctly there came to his ears the sound of that same whistle which had summoned him when he was wanted to again take charge of Hal Keene.

"Ett's ther boss, sure ernuff," he muttered.

"Wonder what he wants now. I'll hev ter go, an' I reckon ther boy are safe ernuff."

With another glance at the lad, to make sure he was still asleep and in his old position, the Roper strode away.

Before he had gone half a dozen yards the boy was after him.

Of course, it was a big risk to run; but risk or no risk, it was the best thing for him to do, and he would chance his involuntary guide turning around and making the discovery of who was on his trail.

The Roper was advancing carelessly, his footfalls sounding with a crashing noise on the midnight air. Suddenly there was a harsh challenge, in the voice of Don Natan, that brought him to a halt. The fire had burned down to a smouldering bed of coals, near which the captain appeared to have been lying.

"Stiddy, cap, ett's me. I hearn yer w'issel an' kim at once. What's wantin'?"

"Thou liest. I gave no signal. Where is thy prisoner? If this be a move to help him escape, I'll—"

"Don't yer tell me I lie!" seemed to come in the voice of the indignant Roper.

"I ain't standin' no sich durned rough talk."

"What, mutiny! Die, you dog!"

Morales fairly yelled out the words and, whipping out a pistol, fired at the shadow from whence the voice appeared to proceed.

The Roper had heard the voice, too, and was terribly puzzled about it, but he did not hesitate as to what he should do. Just a trifle before the flash he flung himself to the ground, shouting:

"Eet ain't me, boss! I never said a durned word. Hol, on! Thar's s'uthin' wrong et'll pay yer ter find out."

"Where is the prisoner? If thou hast allowed him to escape, beware. Quick! Back, and see to him!"

Hal Keene heard the outbreak, but he was already gliding away. Fortunately, he had a clear idea of which direction to take to reach the trail for Gold Bank, and the road was not overly rough. He would have preferred to have horseflesh under him to cover the distance, but as that was impossible he set out on foot and unarmed.

He was not two hundred yards from the camp when he heard a general alarm and an order to follow the trail to the town.

"All the same, I'll follow it till it's time to dodge," he said to himself, though a moment later he sought the concealing shadow by the trailside. A horseman was coming from Gold Bank at a rapid gallop, and swept by at a speed which showed he was in haste.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAN FROM SANDROCK COMES TO GRIEF.

Soft Velvet had chosen his position fairly well. The bar protected his rear, and to a certain extent his flanks.

If he knew anything about Gold Bank, and the men who trained at the Blazing Star saloon, he had not acted unwisely.

When a stranger came in and threw down the gauntlet before one of the sports of the town, it was not always certain how many would take it up.

There was no present movement, however, by any one save Canada Chess.

If Carter had given his pards the warning of a cautious man, there was no traces of anxiety on his face now, though he knew that Soft Velvet was a bad man to have on his trail; and had not the ghost of an idea why he came, or whether it was for peace or war.

"And a man you are by the looks of you," answered Velvet, as he heard

the greeting of the other, and glanced into the eyes which met his so firmly.

"That's the kind I like to meet. When I ask questions they are apt to get right down to the bed-rock of truth. And I'm asking one right now, and mighty loud. What have you done with my old side-pard, Lame Johnny?"

A hum of surprise rose around the room.

The last mission in the world they would have given this dainty sport would have been a search for the extra driver, who had been an occasional visitor at Gold Bank for quite a time.

Chess Carter himself was taken all aback, and had no answer ready.

He hesitated a moment before speaking, and when he did reply it was not in his usual, confident, careless tone.

"Excuse me, stranger, you may be a side pard of Lame Johnny—half the ducks from all the pens in the country seem ter be—but what hez that got ter do with Chess Carter? Johnny skipped the camp a week ago, an' from ther pile they say he took with him, I reckon he's goin' yit. But I'm hyar. I didn't start with him, an' I ain't weepin' now he's gone. Ask me somethin' with sense in it. He don't b'long on my tally."

He gathered coolness as he spoke, and looked Soft Velvet firmly in the eyes. The way they stood it would be hard for either to get the advantage.

"That's your way of talk, but it don't go down with me. The man who says Johnny wasn't square, from bed rock up, calls me a liar, and goes over the range according."

"So you say; but Gold Bank has a different opinion. When you kin show it's on the wrong stope, it'll say Johnny kin come back ef he wants ter, an' take a fresh start. All ther same, it'll be han's on pockets when they see him round."

"I like nerve. Fact is, I've got some myself. But you take the cake. First, you got away with Johnny, and now you want to blacken up his name. I heard about the game, and I came down here to Gold Bank to set this thing straight. First, to show that Limpy was always white as they make 'em; and second, to make things even all around when I find the stripper that took his pelt."

"And where do I come in at?"

Chess was deadly cool by this time, and was mechanically measuring the distance his hand would have to fall to drop to his ready revolver.

"Your trail crossed that of my old pard, and from that time to this poor old Limpy has never been seen."

"You understands what yer sayin'?"

"Clean to the notch. If I find a trace of him since, well and good. You can have your shot when you call for it. If not, I'll take mine."

It was a fair defiance, firmly stated, and Gold Bank was listening to it, but with an idea that there was something behind all this, and certain something would happen before long.

The wonder was Chess Carter had held himself in so coolly.

There were few there who did not agree with him when he spoke again.

"Stranger, I'll have my shot before we are many hours older, but before I takes it I've a word ter say, though ett ain't needed ter set me straight with Gold Bank. Johnny tooled in ther hearse all right ernough; an' that night he lit by ther light ov ther moon. I war with the boyees, ez it happened, ther hull ov ther night, an' I ain't bin out ov ther camp sence. Now, then, how are we goin' ter hev it?"

"That looks like straight goods, an' it's a pity it's not a yard wide. That Johnny may be running yet, and have reached the Gulf of Mexico, for all I care. It wasn't my Johnny. It was another Johnny; and the Johnny I am after is the one that left for Bed Rock with the hearse, and—didn't get here."

There were two pair of eyes watching, each the man behind the other, and it was an even thing which could catch the

drop, or whether both would go down at the opening fire.

The charge was certain to bring a move of some kind, and Gold Bank stood aghast at the unexpected denunciation.

While the bystanders stared two hands acted.

The hands of Canada Chess unfolded, and he swung up his revolver, firing as it came to a level.

It was not a foul shot, for Chess had given fair warning, and Soft Velvet's hand was moving in unison with his.

Only, at that very moment, an outsider took a hand in, which made it not fair.

As the two men pulled their pistols some one deftly jerked a hat across the room, full into the face of the stranger sport.

Had it not been for that it might have gone hard with Canada Chess, for Soft Velvet's revolver exploded an instant the sooner; but the stroke in the face of the stranger, even as his finger was tightening on the trigger, caused his head to fly back and his hand to slightly rise.

The bullet flew over Carter's head, while the sport from Sandrock pitched heavily to the floor.

"Gents, all, this warn't a circus ov my raisin', you'll bear me out in that!" exclaimed Chess, as he saw his weapon had done its work, and the sport never moved from the spot where he fell.

"He done ther crowdin', an' his gun cracked fust."

"That's all right, Chess; but ett's kinder a pity we don't know who throwed that hat. It war ther right thing in ther right place—but ett don't speak well fur ther town."

The speaker was Heavy Hank, the man who had caught sight of Soft Velvet on his entrance.

His own hat was firmly on his head, but all the same it was his hand which had shied the castor, and he believed he had done it without being noticed by any one who would spread the news—and it was Breeze Hackly's tile he had used.

The hat was a spare one, which had been hanging conveniently on the wall, and he believed it came into his hands without any one being the wiser.

"Foul or fair, it was none of my doin', an' ett come too quick fur me ter hold my hand, an' give him his shot over agin, ef that's what yer meanin'. I don't want ter ruffle 'round hyer, makin' back talk—an' it's dead sure that when Gold Bank wants me ett kin find me. Plant him decent, an' draw on me fur expense ef ther estate won't pan out. Then, ef thar's ary court wants-ter set on this matter, call 'round an' I'll be ready ter answer."

It was a fair offer, made off hand, and from what they had seen the crowd would not be apt to object. As far as they could see on the surface, the stranger sport had opened the game and Canada Chess had held back to the last minute.

As the victor passed out of the door there was, in fact, a little murmur of applause, though it was raised by his own peculiar friends.

There were some honest men there, who had not forgotten the charge brought by the stranger. If his revolver had not even yet been clutched in his stiffening fingers they might have spoken.

For a little the body remained where it had fallen, no one seeming to care to step forward and take upon himself the office of a self-appointed coroner.

With the disappearance of Chess Carter, however, curiosity, or something else, moved the spectators. There was a forward movement, but first of all Long Tom Thompson reached the side of the prostrate man and bent over to investigate.

He raised the head gingerly, put his finger on the wound, and traced it along the blood-dabbled skull.

Then he looked up with something like an expression of relief on his face.

"Say, boyees, there wouldn't be ary use fur a necktie party, nohow. Ther sport ain't dead."

"Not dead?" curiously asked a dozen voices.

"Not this time; an' ef brain fever don't set in I'm bettin' he won't lose his pile on this hand. This ain't no place fur him, though, an' ef ther gents ain't objectin', I'll take him along to my shack an' give him a show. Ef you wants him by an' by you'll know whar ter find him."

Long Tom was known to be honest as the day was long, besides having no mean skill in border surgery. In addition, he was relieving them of all further trouble in regard to a man who did not seem likely to be able to talk for some time.

There was no dissenting voice as the herculean miner raised the body from the floor, flung it over his shoulder, and stalked out of the Blazing Star.

CHAPTER XIV.

LONG TOM'S UNBIDDEN GUESTS.

Some hours had passed, and the darkness of the very early morning hung over Gold Bank.

On the street there did not seem to be a soul stirring, and it was too early, even, to look for lights in the cabins of first risers.

The shack of Long Tom Thompson was as dark as the rest, and if any one had been watching it he would almost have sworn there was no one in there who was astir.

That might have been his mistake, however.

On the fireplace there was a smouldering little heap of coals, the glow of which made things barely visible around it, without being perceptible from the outside.

Seated near it, with his long limbs drawn up to his chin, his back against the wall, and a short clay pipe, black and grimy with age and usage, in his mouth, was Tom Thompson.

On a low bunk, his head bandaged and his revolvers convenient to his hand, was Soft Velvet, not much the worse for the slight concussion which had temporarily stunned him, and the flow of blood had been much less than it had seemed. After a rallying sleep he awakened.

Thompson, seeing this, proceeded to investigate, in his own rude way, as to the why and wherefore of the young man's doings, and that led to Velvet's telling his story.

"I can trust you, Tom, and I'll give it to you straight as a string."

"Don't talk ef ett hurts yer head. I kin wait."

"Head is clear as a drum, and I want you to know the rights of it right now. Of course it is understood this goes no further for the present."

"Ter be sure, sartainly."

"I got a bit of good news for Johnny and started to hunt him up. Struck on to his trail, and heard of him large as life at Bed Rock. He had gone through with the hearse, and some of the sports said, like enough he would be back that day; so I waited; but Charley Stoot tooled it in, and said he'd left Johnny back at Gold Bank."

"Yes, Johnny driv extry that one trip."

"I took the trail fur here next morning; and, maybe, pard, I keep my eyes open wider than some. I struck sign on the trail I thought was worth looking at."

"That hearse was held up, true as you live, and Johnny and the only passenger carried off."

Tom gave a long breath of surprise. When Soft Velvet announced this so confidently as a fact he could not help but believe; yet it was a mystery none the less.

"Somebody got on the box and made the run, but I'll swear it wasn't Johnny. Limpy was square as a die, and never would have played dirt in Gold Bank. I let the hearse slide and went on for a little, to see where the trail went to."

"An' run inter a ho'net's nest, eh?"

"No. That was the trouble, I didn't run into anything. There was a smarter head than mine running things, and that trail just vanished. But I found a paper

that let a little light on the subject. It was in Johnny's own writing, and it said the hearse had been held up, and he and the lady passenger were prisoners to Chess Carter's gang."

"How d'yer s'pose he knowd that?"

"They had tried to rope him into their game before he started on the trip, and when they couldn't get him they meant to down him. By this time I reckon they've finished the job."

"An' yer couldn't find ef he war dead an' berried?"

"No, I just couldn't; so I just came down to Gold Bank to stir up the gang. If I could get them worried I had an idea they would hark back on the trail to find if he was good and safe—and I calculated to be along with them."

"Didn't count much on ther chance ov ther sending yer over ther range afore they started?"

"Not as much as I would if I had to do the figuring over again. While I was lying here they had the chance to slide out if they wanted to, and it's two to one the man has left by this time. If he hasn't, it's because they think I'm done for."

"An' when they know yer ain't they'll be comin' fur yer, heavy."

"Hush! I wouldn't wonder if they were coming for me now!"

Through the open window came a sound of the footsteps of a light runner, and it seemed to them that in his rear they could hear the galloping of horsemen.

Soft Velvet raised himself on his elbow, and Thompson sprang to his feet; but before Tom could cross the floor the fugitive swung himself bodily in through the open window.

The intruder instantly turned to look out, but spoke as he did so:

"My name is Hal Keene. Those villains out there roped me, and would have taken my life, but I played them sharp. Hist!"

The dull thud of horses' feet had suddenly ceased, not far away, and it seemed they knew where to look for their quarry.

Then, almost without a pause, there was a rush of feet straight for the cabin.

But Long Tom was now in fighting mood. He would back the lad first and investigate afterward. The door flew open just before the assault was made, and Thompson stood across the threshold.

"Halt, thar! You hear me? Stan' back an' open up yer business!" and he covered the gang with his revolvers.

CHAPTER XV.

HAL KEENE FINDS ALICE.

For the moment, at least, the rush was checked.

"When I see a gang this time ov ther day I ain't waitin' long afore I lets drive, ef they 'pear ter be crowdin' my way. Fair warnin'. Sheer off!"

He spoke sharply and continued to menace the crowd, supposing that he had the entire party in front of him; but there was where he was mistaken. A flank movement was under way which he had not noticed, and while he held them at bay, several others had leaped noiselessly to the window and made their entrance after the same fashion as the boy.

The first intimation he had of their presence was a blow which sent him reeling out of the doorway!

On the instant the crowd rushed forward, while their leader called out sharply:

"No noise, now! Take away his gun and serve him out!"

It was evident they did not care to call the attention of the camp to what was going on there. Long Tom, unfortunately, had dropped his weapons, but he shook himself together just in time, and began to lay about him with his fists, and felling a man at every stroke.

In the rapid conflict which followed he caught the gleam of more than one bared knife, but he was an old hero in a rough and tumble melee, and it began to look as though he was going to hold his

own against them all if firearms continued to be barred.

Inside the hut something else was going on. One man, as we have seen, had "gone for" Long Tom, but two others with him proceeded to business, which was to search for the boy.

He was not there, apparently, but some one else was, for a man sprang on them from the bed, striking as he came!

The first blow sent one of the ruffians down; the second was sent staggering back to the wall.

At the third man he sprang. A straight blow from the shoulder sent him clear out of the doorway, just as the man on the floor sprang to his feet, right in the way of his comrade. The two rolled over together, and before they could gather their wits they were out in the open air, mixed up with the fighters there.

Some one by this time had fired a shot, and now the ball was open!

In the midst of the turmoil there arose a scream, loud, distinct, and apparently from a woman's lips.

A dozen cabins were within hearing distance, and as many men who had been awake or awakened, that scream brought them out, guns in hand; and voices could be heard as they rushed toward the spot where the fight had been going on.

Through it all the real leader of the outlaws sat composedly on his horse, noting the progress of the fray.

The intruders did not care to fight the town. A shrill whistle brought the men out of the fracas, and in a moment more every man was in the saddle. Then, with a yell of defiance and baffled rage, the horsemen darted away in the early morning darkness.

"What's the go?" shouted the first man to arrive, and staring at Soft Velvet, who was indistinctly to be seen.

"Looks as though they might have been after me. Tom and I are all right up to the present time, and I guess there's nothing more wrong with them than a few cracked heads and bloody noses. It wasn't much of a fight, after all. Thanks, all the same, for your coming."

Numerous questions followed, and the Bankers were wroth enough when fully informed of the affair.

It was not hard to guess that the attack was by the outlaw band, though why was not easy to understand, and Long Tom and the man from Sandrock offered no explanation. The boy fugitive had kept out of sight, though Tom was sure he had not been carried away by the ruffians. As he did not "show up" the two cabin comrades made no mention of him, until they could hear his story.

The crowd departed, and the two re-entered the cabin.

"Hello! What are you doing here, young man?" cried Soft Velvet.

The ventriloquist detective, for it was he, was stretched out on the bunk, resting all over.

"Trying to get my second wind. I used the best part of my first stock in getting here."

"Looks like it; but a boy of your style should have had a hand in such an elegant show for fun."

"Excuse me. I wasn't yearning for any fight just at present. If I had felt strong enough I would be on the trail now, to see where they went to."

"It don't take much strength to pick a trigger, and I'd admire your nerve more if you hadn't left us entirely to fight your battle."

"Bless your soul! Didn't I yell? And that was three times as good as a shot at random in a mixed crowd. When they heard my melodious warble didn't you notice how they skipped?"

"There's something in that; but what were they on your trail so fiercely for?"

"That is the outfit of Don Natan, the Mexican outlaw. They held up the stage not long ago, and got away with a passenger. I'm on the war-path to know where she went to, and they know it."

"And Lame Johnny drove that hearse?"

"That is what they tell me."

"Good boy; give us your hand! I'm on the same turnpike. They snatched Johnny when they called that turn, and the lame one was my side pard. We're in this thing together, and perhaps I can do more than hold my end up. Give us your story, and I'll tell you mine. We're beginning to get this thing down fine."

If Hal Keene had looked all through the district he could not have found a better man to stand behind him than Soft Velvet, the Man from Sandrock.

Without hesitation, he told to the two men his little bit of history, the substance of which has already been outlined.

"All right," said Soft Velvet, when the boy had finished.

"The pair went together, and if they kept them so, Johnny may give them trouble, for he's no slouch. If they are above ground we'll find them. If they are not, we'll avenge them."

CHAPTER XVI.

"AT IT AG'IN."

It was early morning up the gulch. Mike Dugan had finished his breakfast, lighted his pipe, and left the shanty, his steps turned toward Jimmy, the burro; and he gazed at the little animal with much curiosity, and some awe.

"Did yez shpake, or did yez not? Till me the troot, Jimmy."

Jimmy glanced up with a far-away look in his eyes and said nothing, yet appeared to understand. Mike thought he detected the wrinkle of a smile about his under lip.

"Sure, an' yez won't commit yerself. Av Oi hadn't heard it meself Oi wadn't belaved it. There may be a fort'in in yez, even ef it may be ownly dhe divil. Which is it?"

The burro turned squarely around, so that Mike could obtain a rear view of his tail, and then the Celt placidly remarked:

"Oi gu'iss it's ownly dhe divil."

"Howly mither! He's at it ag'in," yelled Mike, falling back, with his eyes as big as saucers.

"An' he confisses it's the owld boy! How minny years will Oi be afther shpindin, in purgathory for ownin' dhe baste?"

"Sure, Michael, av yez don't imphrove me rations its not there ye'll shtop at all, at all. It's direct ye'll go roight on to the last place fer lost souls."

And Jimmy, drooping his head, went on eating.

"Och, Jimmy, don't say that! Oi tached yez to walk—ye haven't forgot, have yez?"

He snapped his finger and thumb as he spoke, and the burro heard the sound.

First he shook his head violently; then he reared on his hind feet, as he had done at the Blazing Star.

"Phat would dhe min av Gold Bank say av they could say me now?" seemed to ask the burro, as he strutted away for a few yards, and then dropped again on all fours.

Mike's pipe went around in his mouth until it hung upside down, and he shivered all over with absolute terror.

It did not seem as though there could be a shadow of doubt; the burro was "possessed."

"Oi hate to do it, but there's no hilp for it. It's too far to go for howly wather, an' there's nothing to do but to shoot dhe baste," and Mike turned toward the cabin on the run.

But he heard a voice calling, and, turning, he saw Hal Keene stepping into sight.

"Hold on, Mike! You ought to know me by this time. I'm your friend!"

"Sure, an' you're all roight, but dhe divil's in dhe donkey. Oi'm going to get me gun."

"Been talking again, has Jimmy?"

"Yis, an' Oi can't kape him alannah! He sit me blood to runnin' cowld. He's goin' to dhrag me down."

"Michael, I believe you have the jim-jams. You must know that the beast can't talk, so what's the use of making a fool of yourself? We have serious busi-

ness to think about now; so straighten up and be a man. The time has come when we have got to work."

"Av yez could soilence the donkey it wad be more to dhe point."

"Still at that? I thought I convinced you last night that it was all imagination?"

"Oi thought so meself, phor Oi wor obs'arvin' through the mejum av divers dhrinks. But dhis mornin' he wor at it ag'in, an' me sober as a joodge; so Oi think Oi wad fale safer av Oi had me gun."

"But Jimmy wouldn't. Come. I want to use the burro, and I can't if you are going to have any such whimseys in your head."

"All roight; but the nixt toime he shpakes, down he goes! Oi'll give him fair troyal, an' av it wor my mishtake Oi'll niver go out av dhe house widout a drain as long as Oi live."

He sidled up to the little animal, looking it over with timid curiosity.

"Jimmy, lihstin to me! Av yez love me shpake to me."

Jimmy shook his head and said nothing.

The contemptuous silence was worse than a stump speech, and Mike's anger began to rise, getting the better of his fears.

"Sure, an' a poult or two wid me shtick'll bring him to his sinsis. Lit me at him."

Mike had his stick raised, and was about to administer a blow when Hal caught his arm.

"Hold on, Dugan! You know if you try that he will only kick! Plead with him a little more, if you feel like it; but I can swear to you, it won't do any good."

"But dhe satisfashun av it!" spitting on his hands and warming up for his work.

"But how will that help Miss Molly?"

"That's so! An' av Oi am to s'arch for her it's bitter to go on dhe back av a burro, av it's all dhe conveyence yez got, than thravil on fut. An' mebbe she will shpake to me by the way."

The mention of Miss Molly's name had a calming effect, and after a trifle more of argument Mike was sufficiently sobered to listen to Hal when he opened out his plan for the campaign.

"And now that you are ready for business, I may as well introduce a pard that I have taken in for the occasion."

Hal signaled with his hand, and Soft Velvet, the Man from Sandrock, stepped into view not far away.

"Howly mither av Moses, phat did yez bring him into dhe game for? It's dhe mon az kilt Halsey Horton!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WAYS OF AN ANGEL.

"How do you know it? Was Halsey murdered?"

"It wor no murther, sence it wor a fair fout, wid dhe advantage on dhe soide ave Horton, an' dhat's whoy Oi niver made a kick. Oi s'ane it meself, an' yisterday, whin Oi mit dhe mon on dhe trail Oi knowed him on soight."

"Is he a square man to deal with?"

"Shquare az a shtore box."

"Can you meet him without bringing up old times?"

"Oi kin. Sure, an' he saved me own loife but yisterday; an' Oi begins to say bitter whoi it wor in dhangar. But it moight be onplisint phor him to mate dhe girrul."

"Or for her to meet him, should we find her, provided she knew. Not a word more of this till we can talk it over quietly."

They spoke rapidly, but there would not have been time to finish the conversation had the other continued his advance.

But something attracted his attention, and he halted, looking back over his shoulder, at the same time dropping his hand to his revolver.

His gaze was keen, as it swept over the ground, halting momentarily at one particular point.

Then he came on, smiling.

"There's a party over there in the shrubs, who would like to watch this interview, but when he saw I had dropped to him he pulled out lively."

"It only shows they have us marked aleardy, and we must expect the worst they can do."

"Yes. I reckon it's war between Chess Carter and myself, whether I hit the truth about Johnny or not. What do you propose to do about it?"

Hal had advanced to meet him. While the conversation was going on he looked in the direction indicated, but could see no one, and was almost ready to believe there was some mistake in the matter.

"You don't want any help for your personal fight with this Canada Chess, but for him, as a member of the gang which is working against the girl I have spoken to you of, I have an enmity which will lead me almost any length. Our interests run together, and Mike Dugan, as an old-time friend of her father, feels the same way. We are ready for the campaign."

"An', by the powers, it's a hot wan we'll be afther makin'."

"It better would be. They seem to be after us all. They were making it warm for you up on the divide yesterday, and Keene, here, saved himself last night by the skin of his teeth."

"Yes, and without more evidence than we can show as yet, it would be folly to attempt to push the charge you made at the Blazing Star. You saw then how it was received, even by men who were no particular friends of the man from Canada."

"That's so. They seem to have got it down on Limpy most mighty fine. If anything went wrong he's the scape-goat, and it will be our job to fetch him back from the wilderness."

"And the young lady along with him."

"That goes without saying."

There was no need to waste more time. The day was before them, and once they had decided to follow the trail the rest could be said as they went along. The three shook hands as pledge of their intentions; Mike made some few preparations, while the others went away in different directions.

A meeting place had been agreed upon, and meantime their actions were intended to throw any spies who might be observing them as much off the scent as possible.

The ventriloquist strode away by himself, and seemed to have a point in view up the river. He left the town still further behind him, and walked carelessly along.

The haunt of the outlaws appeared to be on the other side of Gold Bank, and, even if the spy whom Soft Velvet had seen should make his report, there was not time for the banditti to have reached the neighborhood, while had they been there already in any force it seemed likely they would have put in an appearance.

Keene soon dropped a mile or more behind him; then he turned from the trail and wound his way up a gorge among the hills.

His hand was ready to drop to a weapon at the slightest suspicious noise, his feet fell with scarcely audible sound.

When he had reached the crest of an elevation he caught a glimps of a figure creeping cautiously toward a mustang, which was lariatd out to feed. To the halter on its head was attached the lariat, and it was toward the far end of this lariat the man was creeping.

The detective, crouching down, watched the affair.

The horse continued to feed, and the man to crawl, until both hands closed around the rope just above the knot in the end.

Slowly the man rose into a sitting posture, so that his face was fairly seen by the boy watcher.

As Hal had thought, he was a stranger, with broad, bloated face, covered by a stubby beard of a few weeks' growth; his clothing was ragged and grimy, and

his whole appearance that of a tramp bummer, who might be thief as well as dead beat. An anxious look came over the bloated face as the fellow tightened his grip, braced his feet, and, in a low voice, called out:

"Stiddy, thar, pard! Ther boss hez yer!"

The horse, at the call, turned around and calmly surveyed the man without a sign of fright.

"That's right. Take'r easy, Tommy! Yer lord an' master hez hold on ther rope; but he wouldn't hurt yer, not fur a cent; so kim to yer unkel! Sich inteller-gence I never seed. He knows a frien' when he sees him. Stiddy, now!"

The mustang extended its muzzle with seeming confidence, and the man of rags, believing that he had won without a battle, arose slowly and began to step cautiously forward, winding in the rope hand over hand as he advanced.

"That's you," he continued, talking soothingly.

"Ef thar ever was a bit ov a angel did up in hosshide, an' walkin' on four feet—"

And just then the "angel" turned.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LORD OF THE SHETLAND ISLES.

Just how the animal did it the fellow could not have told; but it seemed as though the first motion must have been backward, to give a little slack to the rope, which then tightened with a jerk that almost pulled his arms from their sockets.

Up into the air he flew, and turned a complete somersault.

As he struck the ground he uttered a yell of dismay, but did not let go, and, fortunately for him, landed on his feet.

Up into the air he bounded again, but this time came down on one foot, and at the same time stepped off in a giant stride.

Then the foot race had fairly begun, with the horse at one end of the rope and the man at the other.

"Whoah, dog-gun ye!" the fellow shouted. "I can't keep up, an' I dassn't let go! Whoa! I tell yer!"

He would have been down and dragging had not the mustang galloped in almost a circle, keeping well to the outer limit of the patch of smooth ground. This course finally brought him close to the spot where the immensely amused Hal Keene was lying, and when, at length, the mustang was but a few yards distant the boy rose up to view.

"Here you are, Beauty!" he exclaimed, with a snap of thumb and finger.

This sudden appearance did not frighten the animal; on the contrary, he stopped instantly, and gave a low whinny of greeting!

But the man at the end of the rope did not stop quite; rather, he went plunging on for several more strides, and then floundered to the ground, his arms outspread and his head boring into the sod.

Keene's laugh ceased immediately. He stepped anxiously toward the vagabond, and was relieved to see the head move and the arms fly upward. Immediately the fellow scrambled into a sitting posture.

Hal was not taking any chances, after assuring himself of that much. He whipped out his revolver, and when the fellow glared around him, though the lad laughed, it was over the muzzle of his six.

"Dog-gun ett! what yer la'ffing at?" he shouted, as his eyes fell on the boy. "Hev yer no bowills fur a feller mortal? W'y didn't yer sing out sooner? Fur ha'f a cent I'd—"

He paused suddenly and looked over his shoulder in some alarm.

Beauty had given a snort that might mean anger, and he could see that he was dangerously near to the mustang's heels.

"Keep ther blamed equine off!" he shouted.

"I don't know that I ought to interfere," answered Hal, though he stepped carelessly between the two.

"Who are you, and what did you mean, trying to steal my horse?"

"Me name are Eufrozene Mount Albyn, lord of ther Shetland Isles, an' f'ust cousin to ther Duke of Thunderland. Yer wouldn't think it ter see me now, but ett ain't safe ter jedge how fur a frog kin jump by ther length ov his tail. When I wor at home I b'longed to ther British hairistocracy."

"You look like it, but that don't explain about this bit of horse stealing."

"Hoss stealin'! Bless yer soul, it war clean ther other way! That hoss war jest a-stealin' me. He's a hipenotizer, an' would 'a' kerried me off spite ov myself. Young man, you hez ther thanks ov Mount Albyn. Shake, young man!"

He had staggered to his feet, and now held out a grimy looking paw.

"Excuse me. The lord of Mount Albyn had better lay his tracks with the heels pointing this way; and the cousin of the Duke of Thunderland had better go along with him. Beauty and I are willing to call it off, but I have some friends coming who may take a different view and put you in a position where you won't be liable to be carried off again."

"An' ther hoss re'ely b'longs ter you?"

"It's so reported," was the answer.

"Then, take him an' be happy. I'll plod on along me weary road. You wouldn't think ett, ter look at me, thet I war wuth millyuns, not ary more than thet I war ov patrician blood; but ef I kin git me rights I'll be one ov ther solid princes ov ther yearth."

"And, meantime, you'd like me to loan you a quarter?"

"Would you do ett?" exclaimed the tramp, suddenly galvanized into life once more.

"I knowed you war white, but I didn't think you'd go quite that fur. Ef I kin git that fur ov a start I'm right on ther high road to wealth an' 'spectability."

There was a greedy glare in the man's eyes as he spoke, which told the lad that a raging thirst had already begun to torment the tramp. With twenty-five cents in his pocket and a town only two miles away, he would be apt to fly rather than walk!

Hal tossed the quarter, which was caught by the fellow, who at once turned townward. He took one hasty step, and then stood stock still. His movement had brought him face to face with Soft Velvet, who, unseen and unheard, had reached the spot.

"Kin I ble've me eyes?" shouted the hard citizen, holding up his hands. "Ef ett ain't that durned Sport frum Sandrock, dog-gun me!"

"And this is the lord of Mount Albyn! Old man, you look as though you had been playing in hard luck. Shake!"

Velvet recognized the fellow on the instant, and was not at all backward in taking and shaking heartily that same unclean hand which Hal Keene had rejected.

"Hard luck's no name fur ett; an' yit, afore that, thar war a streak ov sunshine athwart me cloudy road what may dervelop yit inter ther gorjus noontide sun. Velvet, so sure ez guns, I struck ett rich."

"You've made that remark several times before."

"But this time thar wa'n't no dees-count. O'shuns ov float! Sign big ez all out doors; an' me follerin' right up to ther lead. Then I struck ther biggest kind ov a snag, an' ef et hedn't bin fur ther biggest kind ov luck I'd 'a' left bones, an' kim back speerit."

"What kind of a snag was that, Frozzy? You always are hitting them."

"Agints; banditter; bad men ov ther trails—reckon it war ther band ov ther duck they calls Don Natan."

"Eh? That begins to come my way. Go on with your story."

"Ain't much ter tell. They scooped me up while I war prowlin' 'round, an' ef I'd stayed scooped they'd hev took me checks. Thar war a gerloot with ther gang ez hed bowills, an' a game leg. He helped me out at ther back door, an'

give me a letter ter kerry ter Gold Bank—"

"Hand it over, old man. Limpy's my side pard, and you've done a big thing."

CHAPTER XIX.

FROZZIE'S BONANZA.

It was evident the sport and the tramp were no strangers, and that Soft Velvet was willing to rate the lord of Mount Albyn a good deal higher than Hal Keene had done.

He extended his hand as he spoke, and "Frozzy," after an instant of hesitation, began to fumble in his breast.

"Thar she am! Ef it war ary other livin' galoot I'd say, shoo fly; but you're jest ther clean corn, an' ther sooner I hev it off me mind ther better. Thar's no seal ter bu'st, an' ef ett ain't your man you kin give ett back ag'in, an' no harm did."

The Man from Sandrock was eagerly examining the contents of the note, though it was addressed to another individual altogether. Hart Lewis was, no doubt, one of the citizens of Gold Bank, but for that the other neither knew nor cared. It was the contents which interested him:

"Friend Lewis:

If this reaches you it is to let you know I was took off the coach the last run I made. Also a passenger which was a girl. The party as took the hearse in was a fraud, and one of the agents. We are prisoners somewheres in the mountains southwest, but I don't think they mean to hurt the girl. Being lame myself, I can't get away. I reckon there would be coin in it if we was helped out of the snarl. See what you can do. The bearer can explain the rest.

Limpy Jack Hannon."

"How many are in the gang there?" asked Velvet.

"Half a dozen, mebbe. It wa'n't ther size ov it thet made me 'feared, but they caught me unbeknowns, an' stood me up tell they took me tools. Then they had me, see? An' ther lame galoot couldn't help me none on the weapons."

"And do you think you could find the place again?"

"That's wot I'm hyar fur. You ain't a keerin' fur ther most beoportant part. Ef I smell pay rock wunst you bet I kin find her ag'in. I tell yer, thar's millyuns in it; an' thar's no one I'd sooner give a show ter divvy ner Soft Velvet, ther whitest leetle sport ez walks on two legs."

"Oh, come now, you don't mean to say there is anything like a reasonable certainty in this discovery you were speaking of?"

"Hope' may die ef itt ain't bigger thing than ther Comstock lode! All I'm afeard of are thet them galoots hez caught on to ett. They may hev hit ther true vein, an' be workin' et fur all ett's wuth."

"It's likely they were looking for a mining prospect. They are not just exactly that kind."

"They wouldn't hev ter look. They could see with ther eyes shut. Thar war croppin's ez would run three hundred to ther ton, an' ef they didn't step lightly they'd stub ther toes ag'in solid dornicks ov the oro."

"Likely."

"Oh, I ain't chinnin' ov yer. Feast yer opticks on that," and from the recesses of his rags he fished something, which he held up in triumph.

To the uninitiated it might have looked at first glimpse like a bit of ordinary rock, but a keener glance showed that it was a specimen of the righest kind of gold-bearing quartz.

"Frozzy, I begin to believe you," said Soft Velvet, as he thoughtfully weighed the specimen in his hand.

"If there's much more of this to be found your fortune's made, sure enough; and if you want to take a pard in, there's enough for him and a dozen more. You can do as you choose about that."

"An' I'm choosin' Soft Velvet fur that same pard, half an' half, sheer an' sheer alike."

"Dont' do a thing you may regret when you have time to think it over. I'm in no hurry to thrust myself into a corporation; but when I get there I hang on, tooth and nail. There can be no Injun giving about a thing like this."

"An' thar won't be. What yer s'pose I could do with a thing like this, all be my lonesome self? They'd cut me throat er fire me out ov ther deestrick ther fast day ov ther rush, after ther news got back ter ther camps."

"There's something in that."

"You bet thar are—heaps an' doodles ov it!"

"We four of us, were just starting on a trail which would have brought us there, sooner or later, but maybe we never would have looked for signs, and might have stepped over such a bit of float as you have there without ever seeing it. With you to point the way we can reach the spot twice as soon, and I guess we can take care of half a dozen outlaws when we strike them."

"Now you are shoutin'! But, say, Velvet, I ain't startin' jest right now. Gold Bank's only two mile off, an' I got ter hev jest one leetle chance ter sodder me coppers. They got so hot out there in ther wilderness they've actooally melted in spots."

"Come, Frozzy, that will never do. I'm sorry I haven't a full supply on hand; but there's half a pint in my flask, and you'll have to make that last till we get back from the trip."

"Half er pint!" exclaimed the tramp prospector, with the liveliest scorn. "Half er pint fur ther lord ov Mount Albyn, when he goes off on a he-old jam-boree! Half a pint! W'y, it'd take half a barrel ter git me on'y or'narily happy; an' I orter set up ther rest ov ther kaig fur ther good ov ther town. Talk ter me 'bout ther trip in ther mornin'; ter night are sacred ter Bacchus an' ther nymphs."

"But, Frozzy, it takes money to buy land. Maybe I'm wrong, but I have my doubts whether Breezy Hackly will hang it up for you. I suspect he will blow you cold at the first suggestion of trust for booze."

"Not ef my pard sez it's a go. With Soft Velvet standin' behind me. I ain't afared."

"I know just how you feel, and I'd like to accommodate you, but, really, old man, I haven't time."

"Mebbe I could sell out a quarter sheer in me Golcondy? Chess Carter, now'd, be ther kinder sport ez would put up good coin on a yarn like that," and the dilapidated prospector leered knowingly at Velvet.

Now that he had set his mind on a night at Gold Bank, both were aware that nothing but actual force could restrain him.

"You fool, you! If you once started in a deal with Canada Chess you never would get another smell at the bonanza!"

"That's true, pard; but I'd hev hed one night on—an' I'll take et ef I goes bu'st, to-morrer."

"Then I will have to go along with you," declared the sport, resignedly.

"Give me the points where you left Limpy and the gang, and I'll start my pards on the way. They'll be all right whatever happens to us. And then I'll steer you as well as I know how, and when you get outside of that half barrel of benzine I'll shoot you dead if you say whisky again for a month."

It looked like foolishness, but Velvet knew only too well the man he had to deal with—a man who had been his own worst foe so long that no thought of future profit could restrain him at the moment. Until his footing was secured on a higher plane, it was probable that he would remain so.

"An' them pards?" asked Mount Albyn, with the first glint of suspicion in his eye he had yet shown.

"Hyer's one of them. Long Tom Thompson and Micky Dugan make up the rest, and they will be along, shortly."

"Ef you vouch fur 'em, they go; but

ther Irishman are a elerment ov weakness. I knowed him ov old; but p'rhaps I kin stan' him. You hev'n't got a extry barker, hev ye?"

"I have," answered Hal, who had silently listened with much curiosity to this conversation. "There's a little cache where there is a spare revolver, if the British aristocracy has not yet succeeded in finding it. I can lend it to you till you can supply your wants in Gold Bank."

"That's full ov satisfaction, an' ther straight way ter talk et. Load me up with ther weepin, an' I'll load yer up with infurmashun. I'm jest dyin' ter be off."

"All the same, you won't promenade Gold Bank much before sundown. If I am to see you through the ripple, I am going to pick my own time for it. There will be apt to be a heap of fun; and I want to have certain advantages on my side," remarked the sport. "To save international complications, I prefer that the cousin to the Duke of Thunderland should be hung in the dark. Meantime, we will strike for that cache, have a talk over the lay of the land, and then the exploring party will set out. You and I will follow later on. In what sort of shape I can tell you better to-morrow morning."

"Kayreet, yer royal highness. Perceed. Ez fust lord in waitin' I wait on yer imperial pleasure."

CHAPTER XX.

FROZZIE OPENS OUT AT GOLD BANK.

The Blazing Star was the headquarters of the sports who made Gold Bank their stamping ground; but it by no means enjoyed a monopoly of the saloon business in the town.

There were a number of grogeries, and three or four other saloons as extensive in size, if not as exclusive in their patronage.

One of these was the Queen of Spades.

It was patronized by no particular clique, except that the tougher citizen preferred it to the Blazing Star, as being more congenial in its ways. On off nights he was to be found there in all his glory, running things. One or two evenings a week—and sometimes more—there was an attraction which drew representatives of every class.

It was when Johnny the Blinker tuned up his fiddle, and the floor of the big room behind the bar was cleared for a dance.

That was what was going on this evening, and though as yet the brighter lights of the gambling fraternity had not got around from the different saloons, they would all be on hand, sooner or later.

The lights were gleaming through the red curtains at the windows of the hall; the fiddle of Johnny the Blinker was wailing out the notes of a quadrille, and the feet of the dancers in the second set were pounding rhythmically over the floor, when the doorway of the saloon was darkened by two figures.

They could not have presented a greater contrast as they strode in, side by side.

Frozzy had made no change in his costume, for the best of reasons, and, though brushed off somewhat, his clothing was as ragged as ever, and seemed twice as disreputable by contrast with his companion.

Soft Velvet was, as usual, as neat as though just out of a bandbox, and his handsome face had its customary unreadable look. No man could tell by its inspection whether he came for fun, business, or neither.

The representative of the British aristocracy was not so silent, and did not hesitate to proclaim his intentions.

The Blinker was yelling, "Right sashay, all han's 'round!" in the other room; but for the present that had no attractions for the tramp prospector.

"Wa-wa-wa-whoop-ee!" he yelled, the first part of the cry being made by beating against his lips rapidly with the fingers of his right hand.

"Eufrozene Mount Albyn, Lord ov ther Shetland Isles, are hyar on a rampage.

Set 'em up on both alleys, an' run a annex outen ther winder. Ain't sluiced my gob fur a full month, an' I'm holler clean ter me boots. Roll out a barr'l, Chawley, an' them thet wants ter j'ine git yer tincups. Thar's ter be a free drink all round, an' then, them ez wants to kin hev a chance ter shout back. I'm drinkin' with yer all; an' yer all drinkin' with me. Scatter 'em out, ole man, afore we die ov thirst."

His loud voice, as he strode across the floor, instantly called the attention of every one in his direction; and, as Soft Velvet had halted just within the door, he passed unnoticed.

Things might not go exactly according to his word, but it was evident there would be at least a chance for fun around the intruder, and the stream closed in behind him, and rolled on toward the bar in a living, human wave.

"Don't say yer didn't hear me shout-in'!" he yelled, as he saw no movement on the part of the bartender to comply with his exaggerated request.

"Ef you knowed ther streak ov luck I jest hev struck you'd be gittin' down on yer knees an' askin' me ter jest own ther hull blamed ranch. Hyar! Feast yer eyes with those."

With a chunk of quartz in each hand, he turned at the bar, and faced the crowd, his arms extended up over his head.

"An' me ther man ez kin shovel that sort up by ther ton, er dig it out by ther cubic mile! Six thousand dollars to ther ton will she go, ef a cent; an' I'm ther 'rigernal discoverer."

Every man there was more or less interested in such things, and he could not have more easily aroused curiosity.

They crowded toward him from all directions. Half a dozen eager hands were extended.

Frozzy had no objections to the inspection of his possessions, but he did not intend to lose them.

The one he slipped back into his pocket; the other he placed in the nearest hand. At the same time he drew a serviceable-looking revolver, and turned it on the man who took the specimen.

"Excuse me, gents; I ain't acceptin' no monkey shines. When yer gits done lookin' pass her back. Ef no, I ain't stoppin' ter ask why not."

They were rich bits of ore—that was a fact. But, where did they come from? That was the first question asked, after the preliminary expressions of surprise and delight.

Mount Albyn shut one eye, and grinned.

"When I git my shaft sunk, an' begin ter ship ore, I'll be ready ter invite yer all ter look at ther Golcondy. Up to thet time thar's no use ter talk. Now, Chawley, you kin take a look at ett yerself, an' then set 'em up to ther order ov yourn truly, an' fur ther hull house."

The bartender glanced carelessly at the bit of rock. He was not engaged in prospecting himself, and the sight awakened no enthusiasm.

"Very fine, that; but it don't cut any ice at the Queen of Spades, where it's spot cash, and no discount on the bar.el. I'm afraid, my honest friend, that if that's all you've got to show you will hardly get on a bender this night. When you get your crushers at work, and the coin begins to come in, we'll be happy to have you come around, and fill all the boys up to the nozzle."

"But, say! Can't yer see, an' won't yer do it? I'm a millynaire, sure ez guns; an' I'm jest tryin' ter bring trade your way. W'y, ef I went down to ther Blazin' Star, an' showed 'em half ther chance I hev you' they'd be kerryin' me on ther han's by this time. Last time ov askin', Chawley, boy. Set 'em up fur ther house!"

"Couldn't do it," answered the tumbler juggler, with a patient shake of the head. "I'm running this thing for the benefit of a poor widow woman, and her destitute orphans—one of which am me—and if we opened up that sort of business one of us would be mighty apt to starve. Better go on to the next place."

The bartender was one of the quiet sort who never blustered, but the men of Gold Bank had found him all the more dangerous; and the tramp prospector had already sized him up pretty well. The next thing that would come would be a bungstarter, and not an argument.

He turned again to the crowd.

"Sorry, gents, but you kin see how she be, yerselves! I've done me best, but he seems afeared I'll kerrupt yer morals. Mebbe some ov you hed better try him. I'm mighty anxious fur you an' me ter drink tergether. But ef it suits him ary better, w'y not me an' you? Can't sum-bory try him, anyhow?"

The appeal was not well received. The majority of the crowd turned away, and there was some grumbling among the disappointed ones. For a stranger, Eufrozene Mount Albyn was making himself too disappointingly prominent.

He heaved a sigh that seemed to come from the very bottom of his stogy boots. "Sorry fur you, gents; oh, so sorry! But ef Chawley won't trust yer with a weenty little ov his liquid ligtnin', guess I'll hev ter go it alone. Four fingers ov yer very best, Charley, an' jerk 'em out lively. Ain't hed a drink fur a month, an' I kin hardly hev bin waitin'."

Down on the bar he rung a twenty-dollar gold piece, with a great crash, while he shook his head sadly at the puzzled faces around him and softly murmured:

"No use, boys. I did me best fur yer, but he's afeared thet ef yer gits full you'll break things, an' so he draws ther line. Pity, but mebbe by ther next time I comes he kin trust yer better."

The sight of the coin created a change in the attitude of the man behind the bar. Just the ghost of a smile curved his lips under his heavy mustache, and without either delay or unseemly haste he juggled a single glass over the counter to a spot right by the side of the grimy paw waiting for it, and placed by its side the legendary black bottle supposed to contain his choicest brand.

"That's Chess Carter's special vanity, but I guess he can stand it if a high-toned gent like yourself taps it lightly."

"Who's that takin' Chess Carter's name in vain?" and that sport himself came gliding through the crowd.

"Some o' Chawley's nonsense. Hyar's lookin' at yer."

With a grin Frozzy turned off his tumbler, and filled it up again.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PATRONAGE OF CHESS CARTER.

Among the sports of Gold Bank there was a sort of Freemasonry in regard to outsiders which carried the news with the rapidity of a telegraph, and it was more than likely Chess Carter had been posted already as to what had been going on at the Queen of Spades.

And Frozzie had been posted in regard to Chess Carter. On the instant he scented an enemy, though he gave no sign that such was the case, and with that cheerful smile still on his countenance downed his second glass before the bar tender had made change for the first.

"Better make it three, Chawley, an' be done with it," he said as he pushed back a coin.

"This likker jest suits my thrapple to a tee, an' ef Chess Carter picked it out he ain't a bad fedge ov bug juice."

He tossed his third down after the other two, and felt reasonably stimulated. If Chess Carter had heard of his find, and at the same time knew the direction whence he came, it might be there was danger in the air.

"Say, ole man, leave a leetle, jest a weenty leetle fur yours truly. I don't know anything about your find, but this was mine."

Carter had looked the man all over before he spoke, and now came, reaching out for the bottle, which was being so rapidly emptied. He filled a glass for himself, and then pushed the whisky back.

"Help yourself, pardner, and we'll both drink together to the very good luck

they say you have been having. Just about what do you think was the worth of that same strike?"

Gold Bank was still left out in the cold; but since Canada Chess had taken a hand in it had little to say. They had hardly recovered from the shock of Frozzie's brazen impudence, anyway.

And in proportion as Carter became dangerous were his tones smooth and his words carefully uttered.

"Hyar's to us; an' ef it looks like stretchin' good fellership fur a 'ornary galoot like me ter be sayin' all that—hyar's ter me, aryhow. Long life an' heaps an' doodles ov prosperity to Eufrozene Mount Albyn, Lord ov ther Shetland Isles, an' fust cousin of ther Duke ov Thunderland. That's me; an' ez long ez them things come my way ther rest ov ther world kin go hang."

The way the tramp prospector dodged the question was full of ice, but the sport never appeared to notice.

"That's right, ole man. It's all comin' your way, an' glad am I to see it. And if you're at Gold Bank for fun we'll just admire to show you oceans of it. But if you'll take a friend's advice, I would say you better touch that decanter a leetle lightly for a while. It gets in its work monst'us sudden sometimes, an' et always makes me sad ter see a good man down in the early part of ther evenin'."

"Thankee, pard, I don't want ter crowd yer, so don't make no excuse fur not drinkin' fair. Every man ought ter know ter a gallon what he kin hold, an' he's a fool fur runnin' over his measure. I'll take jest one more, all ter my lonesome self, an' then we'll go look fur some of that fun."

He hastily filled his glass again, and pushed the bottle over to the bartender, who was watching with an imperturbable smile.

"Put et away tell we call fur et ag'in. I ain't ther kind fur ter tempt a gent. Et's good likker, fit fur a king, ov w'ich last I orter know."

The crowd laughed. If Carter had not come into the game they might have been hustling the stranger, for their treatment had been enough to make the chronically thirsty howl. But when the acknowledged king-pin of the camp had been treated to a dose of the same sauce they could afford to take their own disappointment good-naturedly.

And they had begun to have a higher opinion of the ragged man, who seemed willing to play his own hand against all the camp.

Probably he was not what he seemed. If Canada Chess had marked him down he was worth the picking. At all events, the two turned away from the bar together, and made their way toward the dancers, who so far had been hidden from view by the curtain which covered the inner doorway.

Their entrance there scarcely attracted attention at first, and if it had the dancers might have been disgusted, but they would hardly have been surprised. Canada Chess had occasionally chosen some queer pards since he had fought for and won the chieftainship of the camp, and if he was off on a lark he was as likely to pick up a man of the Frozzie stamp as a dude from 'wayback—and he was equally at home with either.

The ladies of Gold Bank who appeared at the Queen of Spades were not an exclusive set, though if Mount Albyn had appeared alone and unvouched for there is no doubt they would have drawn the line on the hither side. Even Chess Carter's well understood influence might not have been sufficient to pave his way with a number of the dancers; but, without seeming to do it, he steered his companion toward a part of the room, where they were standing when the sets on the floor came to a finish and sought seats.

A rather handsome woman, after a bold, dashing type, nodded to Chess as she left the side of her partner, and Carter improved the opportunity. Perhaps he had given her a signal before.

"Here, Nell, I've got a friend in tow thet's worth ther knowin'. Just made

ther strike ov ther season, an's in Gold Bank fur a leetle toot. He wants ther delights ov female society fur a bit, while he joins in the mazy, and there's no one can shake the light fantastic to better advantage than Nell Sturgis. Are you bespoke for the next turn? Lord Mount Albyn, Miss Sturgis."

There was an ironical twist to his voice in spite of himself; but there was an imperative sign at the same time. Nell's face flushed, but she accepted the introduction, and let her eyes run coolly over the man of rags.

He had at least brushed himself up for the occasion, his hair was well kempt, and rough as he was in outward appearance he had something of an aristocratic air about him as he acknowledged the acquaintance.

At the same time the music struck up the strains of a seductive waltz.

The fiddle of Johnny the Blink might be but a travesty on the instrument of a full orchestra, but he managed to get a wonderful amount of time and expression out of it, and the smile which Mount Albyn gave was one of memory and not of criticism. He happened to remember when and where he had heard that same waltz last.

"A friend of Chess Carter ought to be good enough for me to tie to, even if he does come in a questionable shape. No one will be apt to make remarks to me; and I reckon the gentleman can take his own part if he hears anything to hurt his feelings."

"My part, er any other part," murmured Eufrozene, advancing not ungracefully. "Just one turn fur the sake ov old times, when I led ther german at Westminster Abbey."

There was a twinkle in his eye which belied the smile on his lips, and Nell answered recklessly:

"I haven't waltzed since I came to this heaven-forsaken hole with my man, but if you say so, I'll take a turn with you; and if you make an exhibition of us, I'll kill you, sure."

"Ther princess sez ett, an' ther princess kin do ett. One turn to that bewilderin' melody an' I'm willin' ter die."

Half a dozen couples were already circling over the floor with more or less grace, and the two stepped forward, and then swung into the circle.

They balanced for an instant to catch the rhyth, and then went surging around. The music just then was playing its loudest, and demanded motion rather than grace.

If Nell had expected to have a dancing bear for a partner she knew in a moment she had been mistaken.

Though those heavy boots made something of a clatter, and the man himself had not fairly settled into the swing, he was going within himself after the manner of one who knew what he was about, and had learned in no second-rate school, while he was treating her with a respect she seldom found in that rough and ready lot of dancers.

When the music changed he was ready for it, and changed with it. She ceased to remember his appearance, and almost forgot the years since she had last had such a partner. The two caught each other's step perfectly and moved together as one. The boot heels no longer clattered on the floor, and Nelly herself no longer waltzed. She had begun to float.

People began to look at them for pleasure and not for amusement. They had seen graceful watzing, perhaps, but nothing like this. A pair of princes of the blood could have entertained them no more divinely. Around and around they floated, the man of rags and the belle of the ballroom, until everything seemed to be forgotten but the motion and the music, and they were a part of them.

Then the music wailed out to a close, with a sigh of regret on the part of the musician, who had been watching the twain with his one good eye ablaze. At almost the same instant Frozzie gave his partner a toss, which fairly cast her half a dozen yards away, while he turned gracefully on his heel and faced a furious

looking man who was making his way, revolver in hand, in the direction of the tramp prospector.

It may have been instinct, but he was aware that a row was on hand, and he was ready for the riot.

CHAPTER XXII.

A JEALOUS FOOL.

While he was at it Frozzie had imbibed rapidly and freely, but the spirits had no more effect on him than so much water, save that it put him in a fair humor with himself and all the world, leaving him with nothing particular to be yearned for.

But he was just as alert as a man could be, and had keen eyes, or he never would have seen in time the danger which was approaching him.

His movement was somewhat disconcerting, for the man came to a sudden halt, and stood glowering with a rage of which there could be no mistaking.

Evidently Nell knew him, for she gave a little cry of alarm; but after that stood silent as a mute, watching what might happen, with lips resolutely set, and face that had grown altogether pale.

"Stiddy, as you are!"

And up went Mount Albyn's hand in unison with that of the other. The movements were so simultaneous that each had the other covered, and there was a fair chance for them to drop together. Then there was a double report, blending together in one crash, and the room was filled with drifting smoke and resonant with the cries of frightened women or excited men.

Yet neither man was harmed, for just at the instant, almost, their fingers began to tighten, Nell Curtis sprung between the two, and, throwing out a hand either side, swung their weapons upward.

Then she turned fairly on the late-comer.

"You fool, you!" she hissed.

"Would you do a profitless murder? What has this man done to you, or what do you hope to gain by it, that you seek his death?"

"Stand aside, Nell, I tell you, I will have the life of the man who comes between you and me."

"And you think he is the man?"

Scorn for the implication swallowed up her other cause for anger, and she glared at him with flashing eyes.

"What else can I think? This was my turn, promised me an hour ago, and when Harry died you as much as said that the man who got a waltz was the man to take his place. I claim you, and I'll have you, or some one goes over the range."

"You are doubly false in what you say, and if you had ever had a chance you would have killed it by putting me to shame before the house. I gave you no promise, and the man who is to take Harry's place does not live. You know why I come here, and that should be enough. When you insult me by hinting I would play the wanton, I feel like killing you where you stand. For fear that I do, henceforth you and I are strangers."

All this she poured out passionately, marking the man down with her pointing finger in a way that made him quiver, though he was hardly convinced.

"It is you who have made me mad," he began. "But you can trifle with me no longer."

"Trifle, Ned Cowles! I never thought enough about you to do even that much. You are mad. Stand aside."

The innocent cause of all this stood quietly listening until he could get some sort of an idea as to what was the meaning of the attack on himself, and now he thought he knew the whole story.

Nell had probably lost her husband, and being left in that strange land to shift for herself had become an attaché of the Queen of Spades, but while she took her place on the floor and forced a certain amount of gayety, she was still true to the memory of Harry Curtis, and this man she had called Ned Cowles would never be a favored lover.

In a general way he could not have hit it better had he been one of the rounders there for a month, with both eyes wide open, though there was one thing further which he was hardly so certain about.

Had Chess Carter an eye to this when he brought the two together? At all events, he seemed to have stepped out of the room.

Cowles heard the woman cast off even his future friendship with a downcast look, and seemed to have for the moment forgotten all about the object which had aroused his wrath. He would perhaps have allowed her strong feeling to so far dominate him that he would have drawn back, forgetful of the raving jealousy with which he had drawn his weapon had Mount Albyn not put himself once more to the front.

"Jest ez well, madame, thet you kim betwixt us. Sich a scrabble war a disgrace ter men like us two, an' ter think ov me in me old age wastin' lead in sich a redickerlous way are ernuf ter make a hog laugh. In course, I'm too big ter think ov smackin' yer friend an' sendin' him home ter bed; but lead makes all men e'kal, an' thar's nothin' ter hinder one er the t'other hevin' a high lot out on ther hill whar I see ther's a boneyard started. Please stand aside an' allow two gents with blood in ther eyes ter arrange things."

The tramp prospector had moved around so that once more he stood before Cowles, who had turned somewhat, so as to face him.

"Right you are. When I drew on you I recognized you as an equal, and there can be no drawing back. How will you have it?"

"Most ary way thet's agreeable to ther house. Mebbe we orter call in ther per-prietor ter give ther word an' see fair play."

"I am the proprietor, and what I say goes here. Curse you for the vagabond that you are, I must have been a fool when I let myself down to your level."

"Certainly, ov course. But it ain't every man wot gits a chance ter measure weepins with a member ov ther British aristocracy, an' a fust cousin to ther Duke ov Thunderland. Aföre you go, p'rhaps we might make a dicker fur ther fixtures an' good will. In course, I count on makin' my livin' outen ther great bonanzer; but a man ov millyins must hev some amusement, an' keepin' a dive ov this hyer kind would be jest about my style. Will we trade, er would yer rather I'd see ther exzecketer?"

Frozzie was as cool as a December morning, and had thrust away his weapon. It looked the height of rashness to stir up the man of the house, but the prospector knew that he had been guaranteed a certain amount of fair play, and it was not likely that guarantee would be withdrawn without some sort of notice.

There were plenty of spectators, and his cool question raised a laugh, which made Ned Cowles angrier than ever.

"Don't trouble yourself about the Queen of Spades. Ned Cowles will be running it when the daisies are growing over your little dirt heap. I can't stop to bandy words. The street is fairly light, and the show there is as good for one as for the other. Waltz out without more chin, or I'll throw you out. Only time of asking."

"Be you goin' along?" asked Frozzie, curiously.

"That was my offer. The fun here don't pay for the broken glass. But you understand, when we get there there will be a fight or a footrace."

"In course. That's what we're goin' fur. Please accept me arm. We kin jest be arragin' matters ez we go along. Kin I hev ther refreshin' pleasure ov escortin' yer to ther place ov meetin'?"

Advancing with a mincing step, Eufrozone doffed his battered hat with one hand, with a low bow, extending his other elbow after a most exaggerated style of politeness.

The crowning insult was too much.

Cowles had been drinking, anyhow, and between jealous rage and insulted dignity, suddenly lost his head. Hastily he reversed the revolver still in his hand, and, without a single sign of warning, struck a smashing blow straight at the unprotected head of the tramp prospector.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"A NOD IS AS GOOD AS A WINK."

Ned Cowles might as well have struck at a streak of light.

Frozzie could talk fast, but he moved even faster. The hand with the hat darted to one side in a swift parry, tossing off the wrist of the saloon proprietor, and turning him half way around from the force of his own blow. Then he struck out himself.

For the time being Ned Cowles was done with jealousy and all other mundane feelings, for he dropped as insensible as a log, completely knocked out by that one straight right-hander.

It was a heavy blow, well delivered, but it is doubtful if it was the most judicious thing the tramp prospector could have done.

An eye less wary than his would have noticed that Ned no longer stood alone. Half a dozen men were at his shoulder watching the affair with scowling brows, and as they saw the man go down they gave a harsh cheer and rushed straight forward.

The movement was too concerted not to have been already agreed on; and it came so rapidly that many a man would not have had time to recover himself and be ready for it.

Mount Albyn certainly was. He braced himself, threw up his hands, and then began to swing out. After each blow he took a backward step, which gave him the chance to send in another, and men began to tumble after a fashion hitherto unknown in the annals of the house.

He never was more thoroughly at home than when in a row of this kind, judging by the satisfaction with which he took hold of the work, and as he only had one acquaintance there—outside of Nellie—who was likely to be his friend, he had the blessed privilege of hitting wherever he saw a head.

Nevertheless, he shrewdly suspected he was fighting for his life, and that if he ever went down before that rush there was little chance he would rise again. How it was all to end might have been an ugly question if he had taken time to answer.

A glance told him Nell Curtis was edging away from the crowd, and was in no danger unless bullets began to fly, so he thought no more of her for the moment, until suddenly her voice rang through the room:

"Jump, old man! For your life jump!" He knew the warning was meant for him, and did not hesitate; nor was he a moment too soon.

Two men leaped after him, but they were too late to fall upon him from the rear; and as he leaped, one after another the lights were turned rapidly out.

"A nod's ez good ez a wunk," muttered Frozzie, as the darkness closed around him.

"Ef I could find Soft Velvet I'd be fur movin' out. Et ain't what they're a-thinkin', but what they're a-doin' in this burg thet bothers me."

As though in answer to his thoughts, he heard a low voice at his side, which he recognized at once as that of the Sharp from Sandrock.

"Light out of this, old man, or they'll down us both. This way!"

"I'm with yer," was the short answer; and keeping closely together, the two tried to make their way out.

They would have succeeded but poorly had it not been for assistance when they least expected it. It was not so easy to find the door in the darkness without blundering into the arms of the enemy. Already they had turned aside from the true track when Nell Curtis came gliding to Mount Albyn's side.

He recognized the touch of her hand

at the same time he heard her whispered warning to follow her guidance.

She knew the ways of the place, and led them out by a little door, which in general was only used by the feminine habitues of the place, and they reached the open air none too soon.

Lights were beginning again to shine through the windows, and the noise of a mob ravening for its prey came drifting out.

"Hope you're satisfied with the racket you succeeded in starting," said Velvet, shortly.

"I was having my own little section of the fun, or I would have been with you sooner. I left two or three sore heads behind me, but alongside of the way you extended yourself that would hardly count. Perhaps you will be willing to get out of Gold Bank now on the first train, and have done with such foolishness until the more important work is attended to."

"In course—pervided ther fust train don't start afore mornin'. Ther night's young, an' ther fun ain't more ner half commenced."

"You blind fool!" exclaimed Nell Curtis, sharply.

"Can't you see you are watched by the bad men of Gold Bank, and that they mean to kill you both? It was no love for you made Chess Carter play the friend. Do you suppose I thought so when I followed his lead? If I had known his scheme I would have turned you both down; but as long as I fancied it was only to keep you in play while he finished his scheme I knew it would be best for me to move as he wagged his thumb."

"You did ther righteous thing, an' when Mount Albyn gits his own he won't furgit ther reccommender; but yer don't suppose I'm areared ov him an' his pards? All we keer about are ter keep a clean reecord fur Jedge Lynch, ef they tries ter raise him."

"Clear case or not, if he brings you before Judge Lynch the rope would be the sentence. He and his gang run the town. I can tell you, they marked the direction from which you came, and have sworn you should never go back. I have sharp ears, and heard more than was intended; but I do not care to give them away more than is needed to put you on your guard."

"Nuf ced, mum. I onderstands ther motto—let no innercent man escape. But Eufrozene Mount Albyn are hard ter drive, an' when he sots out fur a night ov fun he's bound ter hev it."

"Go back, then. You can have all you want in there."

Frozzie shrugged his shoulders.

"Eet's too airly in ther evenin' ter begin ther killin'; and et would take a heap ov that ef we bearded ther lion in his den jist now. I've still got a few pieces ov eight left, an' frum what I've heard ther Blazin' Star'll be ther next best place ter try ter leave 'em."

"You'll be left, in the little back room, with no one to keep away the rats, and a chance for a hole in the ground, without even a wooden overcoat, in the morning. I have given you fair warning, and dare do no more. Let me tell you, though, to keep out of Ned Cowles's way, at all events. If you meet again, win or lose for you, there will be a dead man, and whichever of you drops it would not suit my book at all. Good night."

Nell turned and sped swiftly away without waiting for a farewell from the men she had been warning.

Soft Velvet spoke, with a smile.

"Frozzie, you're not half as desperate a man as you let on to be, and if I know anything about it, you are not hungering and thirsting after gore. What is your game? Open out, man, and let me know the level of the ground floor."

"Ett's straight bluff, right frum ther rattles. We'll go torrads ther Blazin' Star; but wild hosses wouldn't drag me in thar. We'll jest sail on tell we git outen town—allers pervidin' you're willin'."

"Of course I'm willing. Not that I don't mean to even up with Chess, sometime. But I'm not wasting the hours now, when

I have things on a string to help Johnny. Chess'll keep."

"Correct you be. But—small blame to her—Nell will give it to the gang what I said, straight as a string, an' from the sample they hed ov your'n truly they'll swaller ett down like spring water on a warm day. When they've spent half ther night layin' low fur us they won't be thinkin' of follerin' ther trail tell along torrads mornin'."

Both of the men knew how little it takes to start a rush of the floating part of a camp, and though under other circumstances they might have been willing to lead it for the sake of the prisoners, they did not care just now to draw too many men to the neighborhood of Frozzie's find.

Moreover, they shrewdly suspected the ones who would be most apt to go would be the very ones they would most prefer to leave behind. The chances were that the gang of Canada Chess would be at the front.

That there had been a change in Mount Albyn, so sudden as to be mysterious, the sport could see well enough. He had seen such things happen before. He thought he knew his companion fairly well, and did not believe that he would treat him unfairly. Still, now that Frozzie had no longer to worry about the satisfaction of his appetite for strong drink, it perhaps had left him, and he had begun to realize the true importance of his find.

"Your head is level, old man; and the sooner we get out the better. But keep your eyes about you. You piled up the dead wood back there at the Queen; but there's still some left standing, and fit to go on the skirmish line. They're keeping a bright look out for us, and don't you forget it."

"Hist! Ther's one ov 'em on her trail now."

A quick ear could detect the sound of a cautious footfall in their rear. They were being spied upon by some one who had followed from the vicinity of the Queen of Spades.

Fortunately, it was so dark the spy could not see them at all clearly, and without hesitation they turned the corner of the next shanty.

Then the sport strode on with a very incautious step, while Mount Albyn suddenly flattened himself up against the side of the house, his doubled fists held up in front of his breast.

It happened they had struck into a cut-off which led to the Blazing Star, and the tracker, deceived by the sound of the footstep ahead, turned and proceeded to follow Soft Velvet.

He probably thought the side of the house had fallen outward and beaten him down. The Sharp from Sandrock heard two quick thumps, and then Frozzie came to rejoin him, chuckling as he ran.

"Wot a head he'll hev on him in ther mornin'!" he said, as the two hurried along. "Nuthin' ter hurt, yer knows, but jest ter close ther two eyes ov him."

"Hush yourself! Hyere's something else; and it looks as though the first letter of its name was Chess Carter."

The two barely had time to crouch down out of sight when a horseman dashed by.

"It's time we were moving. It's Canada Chess himself, starting for the promised land."

CHAPTER XXV. ON THE TRAIL.

The journey made during the remnant of a day which was at their disposal was not a great one, and the three comrades went into camp at an early hour.

"It's not loike we'll meet wid the inemy to-noight, but all the same it's a watch that Jimmy will be kapin'," suggested Mike, as he doubled himself up in his blanket and lay down to pleasant dreams.

"Which means that you and I are to do the watching," laughed Hal, turning to Long Tom. "If you say so, we'll divide the time, though I don't look for danger at this camp."

"No tellin'; but ef thar are it'll kim airly er late. You keep an eye out fur a couple hour, an' then turn in. I'll wake up torrads mornin' an' tend to ther rest. Ef they stumbles on this camp it'll be chance, like, when they're on the move, er lookin' for a spot ter lay off, their-selves."

It was arranged in this way, and Hal moved off a little from the others, while Tom closed his eyes, and five minutes later he was sound asleep.

Some hours before daylight he awoke and looked around.

Hal had retired to his blanket and Mike Dugan was as he had left him. A few yards away the mustang and the burro stood like quiet shadows, and utter silence prevailed.

Long Tom, arising, moved away noiselessly from the camp, and finally threw himself down near the mouth of the gorge, where he lay for some time. He was well sheltered by the shadows, and could command a fair view of the one probable avenue of approach.

It was just before daybreak, the morning just at its darkest, when a slight sound caught his attention, and by close scrutiny he could make out two figures approaching.

As they came on foot, and without particular caution, to his chagrin, he heard a voice which he recognized well enough, call out:

"No use to hide, Tom. It's only one little pair. Frozzie has had his toot in town, and I'm just settled down to solid old business. It's been an all-night job, but we've caught up with the band wagon, and for the rest of the time I guess we'll stay with the procession."

"So yer ought to, bein' it's your circus," growled Tom.

"You'll hev ter hev three er four hours off ter pay fer your foolishness, an' thar'll be jest that much time lost. But ef you're willin' I dassn't grumble. Guess thar's no danger now, an' we'll go long up to ther camp, whar you kin bunk. Ett ain't fur off frum mornin'."

Two hours later the Sharp awoke, apparently fresh and hearty. After breakfast he was ready for the start. As for Frozzie, it was doubtful if he had been asleep at all. He was ready with the rest. Once more Hal Keene turned loose his mustang, though Dugan, who tramped on with the others, led Jimmy by the halter rope.

This day there was no particular trail to follow.

Here and there were a few hoofmarks, showing the solitudes had not been altogether unbroken; but it was evident there was little of travel in these sections. From time to time Frozzie pointed out spots which he had passed, and hinted of what might lie beyond, though he confined his remarks for the most part to the Sharp from Sandrock.

Mickey Dugan and he were not inclined to fraternize. In fact, there had been signs of animosity at the very outset, which had taken all of Soft Velvet's influence to keep from breaking into a wordy war. As it did not seem possible for the two to converse together amicably, they seemed resolved to say nothing at all to each other.

As it would take them at least two days to reach the vicinity of the camp from which the tramp prospector had escaped, no great amount of caution seemed necessary, though they were always more or less on guard.

So far they had come upon nothing they could positively identify as the trail of Chess Carter, though they believed that he had come this way. Well mounted as he was, no doubt he would succeed in outstripping them by at least a day, though he would have to take a more circuitous route than the foot passengers.

Mike had declared his burro could go anywhere that a man on foot could go, or the little beast might have been left behind. Almost their first experience on that second day out was a climb over a sharp hog back, which would have been beyond the capabilities of anything but the most thoroughly broken of mountain ponies. The rest of the march was

not particularly toilsome, until, at the approach of evening, they came again to rising ground, and were glad to camp near a little stream which, so far as they could see, had not lately been blessed with other visitors.

They were getting near to the country of the enemy now, and it might be that by this time Chess Carter had put the outlaws on their guard. Mount Albyn did not profess to know the route by which the sport had travelled, and Thompson was not certain, though he knew something of the country.

When he heard the proposition to stand watch and watch that night Michael demurred.

"Sure, an' av ye wor lads av sinse you'd lave it all to dhe burro. Ther's niver wan av yez kin kape awake so well, an' he has twice the intilligence."

"Yer reasonin' frum yerself, Mickey, but the rest ov us ain't jest built on the burro scale. Yer no good, nohow. I reckon we kin 'vide it up betwixt us, an' let you an' Jimmy sleep. Velvet an' me kin take ther fust turn, an' Long Tom an' ther kid kin finish out ther night."

"Fix it to suit yerselves; but av there's dhangar, sure Jimmy an' me wull be afther knowin' it fourst av all."

"When we tell yer."

Euphrozone seemed inclined to get up an argument, but at this last insult to the intelligence of himself and burro, Michael turned his back and began softly to sing to himself.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BURRO AND THE BEAR.

Before the song came to an end Long Tom and Hal Keene were asleep, and it was not long before the singer followed suit. He was as tired as any of them, and meant to do justice to the occasion.

Before very long he rolled over on his back and commenced to snore.

Euphrozone was not far distant, and as he heard the sound he glanced angrily at the Irishman, who lay flat on his back. Then he reached over and grasped firmly the resonant nasal organ, shutting off the sound as quickly as though he had closed a valve.

Michael sprang up, but Frozzie had as swiftly fallen back. He glared around, and though he could not detect the sinner, he understood the sin. With a sniff of indignant disgust he picked up his blanket, moved away half a dozen yards from his nearest neighbor, and, wrapping himself thoroughly, again fell into slumber.

This time he remained reasonably quiet, and for a long while had no interruption. But it came at last, for something or some one took hold of a corner of his blanket, which happened to be conveniently loose, and, with a long, strong tug, rolled him over and over, and completely out of his covering.

"Bahd loock to yez, ye thafe av the world! Oi'll take it out av yer hoide, ye miserable, bafe-eatin' Hinglishman!"

He made a rush at his assailant—who kicked up his heels and was off in a jiffy. As he went Mickey saw that the disturber of his peace was Jimmy. The burro did not go far before he halted and quietly began to browse.

"Ye miserable writch!" exclaimed Dugan, shaking his fist.

"Kim nigh to me ag'in an' Oi'll break ivery bone in yer body."

Again he wrapped himself up, scorning the snickers of Mount Albyn, who had been an amused spectator of the affair.

This time there were several hours in which he was unmolested, and silence was complete around the little camp. Michael was at his soundest, and did not even snore, but his breath came steadily.

Just about midnight came a sudden awakening.

Once more the end of the blanket was seized, and the living mummy unrolled, though this time it was done in a cyclone fashion as compared with the last.

"Och! Whillaloo, murther!" yelled Mickey, springing to his feet, with his shillalagh ready.

"Dhis toime Oi'll murther ye or take dhe divil out av ye. It's shtand it Oi will no longer, at all, at all."

He dashed at his four-footed assailant, striking as he came, his club beating a regular tatoo, that at ordinary times would have been apt to crush Jimmy to the earth.

But Jimmy did not crush.

Instead of that he expanded visibly.

Up he rose on his hind legs, and the action brought his head out of the shadow, fairly into the moonlight.

To Mickey's horror, the long ears, smooth skin, and slender limbs, were no longer visible. Instead of them he saw a shaggy hide, a cavernous mouth, full of gleaming teeth, and paws awfully armed with monstrous claws.

"Ochone, dhe divil's out av him, sufe enough, but phat will Oi be doin' wid it?" gasped Dugan, staggering back.

Since the time the burro had begun to talk Mickey had suspected there was something wrong with him; but this was worse than the worst he had suspected. He just had time to cross himself once when he felt the shaggy arms closing around his thighs, and he was lifted high in the air.

Then, still on its hind legs, with its forepaws tenderly embracing him, an immense cinnamon bear shambled off with Mickey Dugan as his captive.

As far as Michael was concerned, he had no idea save that he was in the grasp of the prince of the powers of the air.

"May all dhe saints protiect me!" he began. "Matthew, Mark, Luke, an' John!"

Here he was interrupted.

Fortunately for him, the man from Sandrock had been wakened by the noise and leaped to his feet with senses all on the alert.

Euphrozone Mount Albyn had seen the greater part of the affair, and at first, misled by the shadows, had supposed it was but a repetition of the previous performance with Jimmy. When the bear finally rose up he was so thoroughly obdusped he remained voiceless and staring, with his mouth wide open.

It was not a pleasant complication to face, and Soft Velvet understood it in a single flash of thought.

The animal was not one to be dropped dead by a single shot, and a wound that was not instantaneously fatal would leave him plenty of time and the very best of inclinations to tear the unfortunate Irishman into shreds.

The cinnamon appeared to be utterly oblivious of the presence of any other living beings, and that gave Soft Velvet his chance.

A few light bounds placed him right in the rear of the animal, and then he threw out his foot in a dexterous trip, which sent bruin tumbling headlong, his arms opening as he fell.

Mickey may have been frightened, but he was also very wide awake.

The instant he felt the arms of the creature relax he twisted himself out of the grip, and went tumbling heels over head to one side.

He turned more somersaults in that scramble than an ordinary circus athlete does in a week, and when he finally happened to light on his feet he began to run with an earnestness which seemed to say he never meant to stop until he was safely back again with Bridget and the childer.

Soft Velvet did not run, nor did he have any thoughts of it. Since the fight had opened there must be death for some of them or for bruin, and he did not mean to give the latter a chance.

From the nape of his neck there flashed up a long, keen bowie, and, springing forward, he flung himself fairly upon the back of the animal, and then struck fiercely downward.

The steel descended to a hair upon the spot for which it was aimed, and drove right through the spinal marrow, deep into the body of the shaggy monster.

The blade wedged fast, but the Sandrock man made no second effort to withdraw it, for he knew the blow was one

which needed no repeating. The brute was absolutely helpless now, and his death only a question of moments. He sprang back and threw up his hand with a shouted warning:

"Hold on, Frozzie. No shooting! The shot would carry clear to Prescott and wake the natives to the Gulf of Mexico. The brute's done for, and the thing for us now is to stop Mickey's race for the cup. He's heard the word go, and he'll never stop till he gets 'round the track."

Had nothing occurred to stop him, Mickey would probably have justified the prediction. He had got to going, and had no notion of stopping, when he was brought up all standing by running against some unknown object, which appeared to rise suddenly and silently out of the ground.

The shock was great. Dugan was flung violently backward to a sitting posture, striking the earth so solidly there was a dint in the ground about the size and shape of a washbowl.

The thing with which he had collided turned slowly half way around and stared down at Mickey, who glared up at him.

"Howly Moses! The owld bye has turned back inter Jimmy ag'in. The saints presarve us, an' phat will Oi be doin' wid him?"

Jimmy elevated his nose and his tail, and was about to return answer when Soft Velvet threw his coat over the head of the animal and choked off the coming bray.

"Get up, you infernal fool, and hopple your brute. The danger is over for the present, but there's no telling how soon we'll have another visitor. You and Jimmy make a nice pair of guards, but all the same, hereafter I think it will be best to tie your legs together and bury you both in a hole when we want to have a decent bit of rest."

"An' it's me yez ashks to take howld av the murtherin' divil. Not on me loife, Oi don't."

"Then we'll bury you both, and try and wagon on without you," retorted the sport sharply, flinging up his pistol hand with a derringer in it. "Last time of asking. Obey orders, or down you go."

Whatever he really intended to do, the tones of the man from Sandrock said shoot, and Mickey, scrambling to his feet, approached the little brute hesitatingly.

"Sure, an' a blissid minnit ago he wor a roarin' lion, sakin' to devour; an' now he's az p'aceful az a mule. I niver know how to take him."

"He is a mule—or the next thing to it. If you'll go over yonder a bit you'll find your roaring lion, with my knife in his back."

Mickey tied up his burro and then went to take a look at the carcass.

"Sure, an' it's ownly a bear afther all," he said, with a sigh of relief; "but there's somethin' quare about the burro all the same. Kape an oye on him, an' call me av he tours into the owld boy wance more."

And Mickey returned quietly to his slumbers. The natural had no fears for him. It was only the supernatural which could shake his courage.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MOLLY HORTON'S POOR RELATION.

Without any actual threats or positive physical cruelty, there could not have been a better course taken to shake the nerve of a girl than that pursued with Molly Horton.

The weary waiting for the unknown thing which was to happen, the cramped confinement in which she spoke not a word, save now and then the stolen and whispered conference with Lame Johnny; the terrible uncertainty of what was intended to be her fate, all operated so on her mind that the wonder was she could keep up a semblance of courage.

As for the outlaws, they took the world easy.

Now and then they may have grumbled among themselves a trifle; but Molly heard nothing of that, and the lame one but little.

Liquor was absent. Outside of that there were supplies in abundance; guard duty was light, and rather carelessly performed.

Lame Johnny was the busiest man in the outfit, because he was on duty practically all the time. Since it had been seen how cheerfully he entered upon his labors of chief cook, and it became apparent that unless he could make the effort on horseback he would not be able to escape, he had the run of the camp. Weapons were kept out of his reach, and he was not allowed to get below the guard at the lower end of the gulch, but otherwise a careless observer might not have noticed he was a prisoner.

The men talked rather freely before him of their own affairs, concerning which he had picked up considerable information; but nothing was said in his presence in regard to what was behind this strange imprisonment.

One day, when he brought dinner to Molly he lingered, though in an unconscious way, which might disarm suspicion.

"Eat hearty and keep your strength up," was what he whispered.

"The boys are looking for their boss, and when he comes you'll not be long in knowing what's in the wind."

"The boss! And who is he?"

"You can't prove it by me—though I've kept up a mighty lot of thinking. Putting two or three things together seems to help a little; though I can't make it out clear. But you'll know soon enough what's behind it all, and I needn't tell you if you need a friend, Lame Johnny will stand with you as far as he goes."

"I do not doubt that, but be careful. One man can do little against so many, and I would not ask you to bring ruin on yourself in a hopeless cause. Woman's wit must save us, if anything can. If that fails—I can die."

"Don't give up the ship. Hold the fort to the last gasp. There's a chance for help to come any time, now. That party who got away may not have been much to look at, but I have a fancy he was better than he looked; and if he only carries my letter as he bargained we'll hear from the boys, sooner or later."

"Thanks for your words of encouragement, though I do not need them, as you may have fancied. It will be a fight to a finish, and when that comes, be sure I will win, or be no longer living."

Johnny slipped away for fear the earnestness of Molly Horton might be observed and some suspicion aroused as to its cause.

He meant every word he had said, but was not yet ready for the fight, if fight there was to be.

It was just as well Johnny had been able to give this warning to his fellow-prisoner, since she had time to think over her possible line of conduct before the expected "boss" put in an appearance.

He came quietly, and was in Miss Horton's presence before the lame driver was aware he was within the camp. The night had fallen down in the gulch, and Molly was reclining by the side of a flickering little fire, wondering what was to be her fate, when she became aware of the fact that she was no longer alone.

At the distance of a few yards a masked man stood, gazing thoughtfully down upon her.

She started up in indignant surprise. This was the first time her privacy had been intruded upon in this way. Heretofore no one had put in an appearance except for reasons pertaining to her comfort.

She saw at a glance the man was a stranger—that he did not belong to the gang which had accomplished her actual capture—and knew he was the arbiter of her destiny, or intended to be. She folded her arms and stared him in the face.

He returned the stare with interest. She stood just where the flare of the fire could fall upon her to the best advantage.

"Well, sir, what do you want?"

Seeing the intruder did not care to open

the conversation, the girl cast the question at him in an indignant tone.

"Easy, little one, be easy. It's just as well to make a friend of me as an enemy. In fact, I have been a heap sight more your friend in all this than you may think. If it had not been for me I have a strong suspicion that long before this you would have gone over the range."

It was Chess Carter speaking; but in spite of a touch of slang now and then, it is doubtful if Gold Bank would have recognized him if it could have heard. He had dropped much that had been assumed, and seemed to be no longer the same person.

You are the one, then, who is responsible for this outrage?"

"If you call saving your life an outrage, I guess I will have to plead guilty. Things may have seemed a little inconvenient up to date—that I will admit—but so far I don't think I have much to reproach myself about. How it will be in the future will rest with you."

"How is that? What do you mean?"

"I mean that here I can protect you; had you ever reached Gold Bank you would long before this have been a dead young woman."

"I cannot believe you. This is a plot—of course I understand that much. How, then, can I either believe or trust?"

"Perhaps it will not be so hard to do so when you once understand that you must. I swear to you that had you gone but a little further than the spot where you were stopped you would have met one who was your enemy to the death. Nothing but this scheme of mine saved you from his hands."

"And having saved me, what do you propose now?"

"I propose to trust you if you are willing to bargain. If not, I'll have to trust the other fellow, and shut my eyes to whatever unpleasantness is going to happen."

"You must be more definite. I cannot understand you."

"I like the cool way you take this, and I don't mind giving it to you straight. If I tell you a good deal that you know, it will only be to show the hand I mean to play. You are the daughter of Halsey Horton. I am his brother. Naturally, I should be your guardian, but there is a little misunderstanding with the rest of the world which prevents my posing in my proper sphere."

"What! My uncle? I cannot believe it. He—my father's brother—died long ago."

"So you have thought, and that is what I am willing the rest of mankind should believe; but, all the same, I am of the tribe of Horton, even though I be the very blackest sheep ever seen in the flock. Blood, they say, is thicker than water, and what more natural than that, when chance opened up something of the facts and plots in regard to my niece, I should decide to stand by her if she would stand by me? And, having been allowed a sight of the hand against you, I will be able to do it a great deal better than you have any idea of."

"Yet you have caused me to suffer all these indignities and dangers, have left me here to eat my heart out, and have come at the last, bringing a threat with you. You must expect me to fall down and worship this newly found uncle of mine. You are a fraud and a villain, and I would not trust you if my life hung on the choice."

"You might do worse, all the same. Probably you know nothing of your other uncle, on your mother's side. I'm a little saint on tin wheels compared with him. If you could only imagine the warm reception he was planning for you, I fancy you would change your tune. Why, girl, you stand between him and a million, and he has killed a dozen for the thousandth part of that sum; what do you suppose he would do to you?"

This intelligence seemed more of a surprise than the other. Molly Horton stared at the speaker in blank dismay and made no answer.

"It's a fact. You see, I am showing

my hand to the last card, so you understand that I am bound to win. No doubt you have heard of the Black Don, the Mexican who has been known on both sides of the border as Don Natan, the outlaw. He was your mother's brother, and would have been heir to the Morales fortune had he not been outlawed for a little work with the stiletto. That is in a fair way of being fixed up again, and when he can once more make his appearance without danger of execution by law, such a thing as a will leaving the property in a different direction can never stand in his way, especially if the family mentioned in it should happen to be extinct. I am willing to fight your battle, but the laborer is worthy of his hire. Halves, or I go to the other side."

CHAPTER XXVII.

ANOTHER SPECIMEN.

After the explanation given it was not hard for Molly Horton to understand the alternative presented. Though this man might not be willing to do the deed himself, he could hand her over to Don Natan, and from him she could expect no mercy nor offer of bargain.

If this man, who professed to be her father's brother, could even make such a threat, how could she believe he would be a faithful ally, or that she would be safe in his hands?

It did not take her long to make up her mind.

With folded arms she looked him full in the face and spoke:

"I cannot trust you. I refuse. Do your worst."

"But can't you see that the trust will be all on my side, and the only guarantee I can have is your word once given? I propose to see you safely through the danger, defend you from the Don, and place you as mistress in the home of your mother. After that I will claim my reward. You can refuse; I can avenge that refusal. Outside of that I fail to see how you can help but be better off by yielding. If I abandon you to Natan your doom is sealed."

"So let it be. I refuse to barter away my birthright, or even a share of it, with a man who comes to seek it with a threat."

"Perhaps you will see your mistake before long. Natan is on the trail, and if I was sure you would remain of this same mind I would not think it worth while to defend you. On the chance we may yet come to terms, I will try and take care of you in spite of yourself. Be ready to move when called upon. This will be a safe refuge no longer."

"And when we leave, whither do we go?"

"You are too deadly cool—yet I have no objections to telling you in part. If we come to terms, we go to the Morales Ranch and to Don Ramon Ignacio, the man who holds your fortune for a time in trust, the man who hates Natan, and would welcome you with open arms. The proof you were seeking I have to my hand—to use or destroy as I choose. If you still prove obdurate I may as well make the best terms I can with Natan. It may be that I can buy his good will again."

He showed little anger as he spoke, but a great deal of firm resolution, and, without waiting for answer, he turned away.

Molly might have been willing to hold him still longer in conversation, for the sake of further explanations, but she was too straightforward to pretend, and he saw that at present it would be but a waste of time.

He glided along among the shadows like one who knew his way, and reached the camp of his confederates, which lay in the gorge, just below Molly Horton's prison pen.

The hour was not yet late, and the outlaws were still waking. They were gathered together in a little group, talking in low tones. A couple were absent on guard duty, but the others evidently had a matter of some interest under discussion.

When Chess Carter put in an appear-

ance they recognized him at once, but there was something about their greeting which showed they were not altogether at their ease.

"Hyer at last, boyees," exclaimed the sport from Canada, as he stepped forward, resuming the character he had so long been wearing at Gold Bank. "Reck-on yer more than half glad ter see me, but I'm hyer about on time. Couldn't leave sooner. How have things been going?"

"Things hez bin goin' on'y too straight, boss. Mebbe we wouldn't a keered ef you hed put it off a month er two more."

"Eh! Somethin's been goin' on—what was it? I expected to find yer dead tired, an' brought a little salve along to grease the wheels. Jest an installment, ter keep yer movin' tell ther time comes to pay off in full."

He drew out a handful of gold coins, carelessly clinking them together.

"Yer shoutin'," said the man who had already spoken; and half a dozen paws were outstretched.

"Twenty apiece as a starter on the month's pay. And you don't want to forget that if things pans out rich ther'll be a lump sum in the wind-up thet'll make yer eyes water."

"Mebbe they hez panned out a'ready," was the answer, in the midst of the low, musical jingle as the men dropped coin after coin into their pockets.

"S'pose yer looks at that. Yer can't see et so well ez by daylight, but thar's shine ernuf to ett ter show et's ther real, genooine stuff."

The man held out something weighty, and even in that uncertain light Canada Chess could see it was a lump of quartz. He took it and examined it more thoroughly.

He had not a doubt about it. It was the same kind of a specimen as that flourished at the Queen of Spades by Mount Albyn, and doubtless from the same place.

He had suspected something of the kind, but had hoped these myrmidons of his might not make the discovery. If he could have kept the knowledge to himself there might have been a fortune in it for him at a more convenient season. A pity it was that it had to cross his path now; just when he was mixed up in another game, which he hardly dared throw up.

He looked the fragment of rock over thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said, in an abstracted tone.

"It's ther very same—both chipped from the same bit ov rock. You've had a visitor through hyer that so far you haven't said anything about. Perhaps you didn't see him."

"How did you know that, boss?"

"Because thar war a tough lookin' sharp come inter Gold Bank an' flashed the same kind ov a specimen afore the eyes of the town. Looks as though he might have been visitin' an' dropped this 'round hyer."

"Then yer don't think we found ther float what it wasn't lost?"

"Not if yer picked it up within fifty mile ov hyer. I've bin all over the ground meself. But fifty mile er more southwest, among the gulches thet haven't bin explored, there's a chance fur such a strike—an' before this thing is over we may get there. An' I needn't tell thet in a thing like that it will be an even divvy all 'round."

By a lucky chance Carter had hit the true explanation. The specimen was one left behind him by Mount Albyn when he made his escape. The thing had just been noticed that evening, and had not Carter come with his suggestion, it is more than likely morning would have found the whole gang resolved into a corps of prospectors.

"Ef yer thinks you kin show us whar this come from ther boys'll be willin' ter foller yer too quick."

"Perhaps. Now that we have hit on the trail, I am almost sure I can."

"We wants ter git thar ahead ov ther tramp. We hed him kerrelled tell you'd come, but he got away. Ef you seen him

in Gold Bank what we're afeared ov is that he'll kim back at ther head ov a rush. We might hev ter be tellin' what we war doin' hyer ef they didn't find us at work with shovel an' pick."

"Don't be alarmed about the man. He had struck enough trouble to keep him busy, fur he hed fell foul ov Ned Cowles. He got out ov that by ther skin ov his teeth, but thar war a lot ov the boys lookin' fur him, an, I reely think afore mornin' he found ther air ov Gold Bank war unhullsome fur his health. For a guess, I'd say he'll never git back. How about Limpy? Any trouble with him?"

"Not a whimper. Fact are, we couldn't git along without him. He's doin' ther cookin', and we've promised him wages. He's jest 'way up."

"Wages goes; but he had better made his bargain when he had the chance. Keep a good watch on him when we're on the march—we'll leave here by mornin'."

"Bully fur that. This are a mighty fine place ter camp, but it's not jest so pleasant fur a stay, ter say nothin' ov ther reesk."

"There's just one risk; an' that you're paid fur takin'. Satan himself couldn't find you in this gulch ef orders war obeyed, as I s'pose they have been; an' ef we peep outside thar's only one man I'm lookin' ter meet, an' I told you fair an' square at the start that we might have ter fight him."

"Allers pervidin' ther tramp don't kim back. Ef he could find the way out he might be able ter lead ther way in."

"Who would want to come in? Nothin' has been said at Gold Bank about our leetle job, an' ef Lamé Johnny war known ter be hyer they'd only want ter interview him with a rope."

"Hark!"

There was a sudden interruption. Faintly, and as though from some distance, came to their ears the sound of a pistol shot.

They listened for a time, and then one of the outside sentinels came stumbling back.

"I ain't jest sure," he puffed, "but I hev an idear thet ther Black Don are on ther road, an' et sounded ez though he hed struck somethin' out yonder on ther plain."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BLACK DON PLAYS HIS TRUMPS.

The intelligence brought by the scout was startling if true. While Chess Carter had reasoned that sooner or later the Black Don would get on his trail, he did not expect him so soon; and for the present he was not certain what was his best policy—whether to fight or flee, or come to terms.

It was not yet certain he could not come to terms with Molly Horton, and until he was he would have preferred Don Natan at a distance.

The shot heard was something more than a warning, since he knew none of his men were in that direction, now that this scout had come in.

There must be some other party near at hand, and instantly he thought of Soft Velvet and the tramp prospector, whom he hoped he had left behind him at Gold Bank, to stay.

Rapidly he told off in his mind the possible strength of the two forces, and decided on his course.

"Leave Patsy on guard over ther prisoner, and ther rest ov you foller. The more fightin' the more extry pay, an' I wouldn't wonder ef hyer war ther place whar ther fightin' begins."

It was not certain with Chess that fight he would, but it was as well to be ready for work, and if it looked like a sure thing he had no particular objections to joining forces with Soft Velvet and wiping out the stronger band of the Black Don altogether.

Then it would not be hard to dispose of the others.

In any case the defence of the gorge could be as successfully made from the outside as from the inside, with the advantage of a place to which they might

retreat in case the first results of the battle were uncertain. With his men silently skulking behind him, Chess Carter led the way down the gorge and out among the scattered rocks which lay along the only practical trail for horsemen.

No further firing had been heard, and for a time they saw and heard nothing of the intruders. It was even difficult to guess in exactly what direction the sound of the shot had come, though Carter managed to make a pretty fair guess. He left his men in what seemed a fair spot for an ambushade, and went on alone.

Chess stepped carefully from the outset, but before he had moved a dozen rods he redoubled his caution. Faintly to his ears came a sound like the low murmur of voices, and he had hopes of being able to glide near enough to distinguish what was said without being himself discovered.

He came a trifle too late. The murmurings ceased, and he heard the muffled fall of footsteps as the party softly glided away. What troubled him was that the party seemed to be going in the direction of the gorge, though, fortunately, they flanked him by a few yards.

It was too late to retreat without attracting attention, and he was not yet willing to open the ball. He crouched down where he stood and awaited the chance of discovery. His men had their orders, and whoever this outfit might be they could not go far on that line without being halted.

He did not give due credit to the shrewdness of these men who were spending their lives on the trails, and among the mountain fastnesses, and who continually held their lives within their hands.

He stared carefully in the direction of his men, and began to wonder if they would take the alarm, or whether their first warning would be the rising of the phantoms around them. He was on the point of shouting a warning when he was saved the trouble.

A harsh, strange voice shouted:

"You thar, surrender. Down with yer guns an' up with yer hands, er there'll be dead meat fur breakfast, an' lots of it!"

At the same time, from a point not far away and above where the men of Chess Carter lay, there was first a flare and a splutter, and then a burning blue light was flung down into their midst, rendering every man visible, while around them rose a clicking of hammers and a low growl of voices, which told that they were caught in a trap.

However it might be in a fight to a finish, in mountain strategy Chess Carter was but a child in the hands of the Black Don.

Yet, at the moment of the illumination something else was revealed in addition to the ambuscaders who had been ambuscaded.

By the glare two men saw each other and sprang to their feet, each shooting out a revolver, the muzzle of which almost touched the breast of the man opposite.

Chess Carter and the Black Don had found each other, and each held the drop.

Had they been strangers both men would have shot, and both would have gone down, since at that distance there was no earthly chance for escape. Fortunately, each knew the force of the other, and that the recognition was mutual. They waited for the sake of self-preservation.

"Call off your dogs an' drop your hand. When that blue light fails you die, even if I go along with you."

"Ha! Thou art the one to throw up thy hands. It is death, certain and sure, to resist."

"Then we go out ov ther wet together. Ef you tries to play Chess Carter foul he'll die with his teeth tryin' ter meet—an' ef he knows himself, they'll get there, anyhow."

"But thou and thy men are covered."

"And if trigger is pulled you die."

"Thou hast played me false, what else canst thou look for?"

"It war ther other way. You threw off on the man thet had bin your pard. I hed ter protect myself."

"Thou art mistaken. No thought had I of such work."

"Then, why didn't yer open out to bedrock. When I seen you hed ther pins set fur what looked like a cross game I headed yer off. Ef you can prove it was on the square, I'm ready for a new deal."

"Thy hand."

Without hesitation the Don dropped his pistol to its scabbard and extended his hand, which was grasped by the man from Canada. A word from each brought their men within the lines of the truce. With marvelous swiftness enemies to the death had been transformed into seeming friends.

"Thou hast the girl?" asked the Don, as their hands fell apart.

"In course; though how yer got onter ther trail ov it are more than I kin tell."

"There were others besides myself who looked to find her. Once knowing she was lost it was not hard to guess who removed her. After that my spies kept good watch, and when Chess Carter moved Don Natan was not far behind."

"You didn't hear ov another party on ther same trial?"

"They come, but not as the bird flies. When they reach here we will be miles away. Once should they see us they must die."

"I left 'em in good shape ter go up ther flume, but they must a got away. Thar's no trustin' 'em. Ef you had laid out fur them as keerful ez you did fur me, it'd bin better all 'round. An' yit—I've a hankerin' ter drop ther Soft Velvet Sport myself."

"When the time comes for that I will never say thee nay. And now for thy prisoner."

"Best ter leave yer men hyer on guard. I'm not trustin' to ther sport an' his pards bein' fur behind; an' our camp are an ugly place fur a stranger ter git into by night."

"Thy men an mine are all of the same color; leave we them here to watch together. It is as well there be none of them near to hear what is to be said this night."

Though the two had renewed their partnership they did not seem to trust each other too well. The Don was taking the larger chances when he undertook to penetrate the fastness alone with Chess Carter.

Neither hinted at this, but side by side they sought the opening to the gorge, and made their way along the narrow path which led toward the camp within. Had Chess so chosen he had a dozen chances to smite his companion, but for the present he seemed willing to play an honest game.

Straight to the cavern in the side of of the rocky wall he led the way though all was darkness there, and he was somewhat surprised that they received no challenge.

"Ho, Patsy!" he softly cried, but received no answer.

"I left ther man hyer; kin he have been false?" he muttered, halting on the spot where he expected to find his guard.

Everything remained silent, and in the intense blackness of the place not even a shadow was to be seen.

With a foreboding that something had gone wrong, he struck a match, and staring around by its feeble flame, saw Patsy lying in a crumpled heap, with a mangled, bleeding head, while the little niche beyond, which had held Molly Horton, was now empty.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DREADFUL DROP.

Although Molly Horton kept up a brave front before the man who professed to be her father's brother, she was far from feeling the courage she exhibited.

After her experience of his desperate nature she could well believe he would

be as good as his threats—or as bad—and this other uncle of whom he had spoken was, no doubt, of the same order.

She had thought of escape from the moment of her capture, but so far had taken no steps in that direction, because opportunity was lacking for what would seem a successful venture. To be alone in this wilderness, which surrounded, would be like a step from the frying pan into the fire.

It is possible that after the departure of Chess Carter she would have given herself up to something like despair had it not been for a welcome surprise. Hardly had the noise of his footsteps died away, when Lame Johnny stood before her.

"You'll excuse me, I hope, but I was afraid something was going to happen, and I slipped around so as to be on hand. I heard every word Canada Chess was saying."

"Then, you heard me defy him. It may not have been the best course to take, but I have vowed that I would die sooner than strike hands with such a man. And he to call himself my father's brother!"

"That part of it's neither here nor there. The big fact is that if you keep up the bluff he'll turn you over to the Black Don. I thought maybe we could run things along until my pards came, but from the way it looks, I calculate it's about time to skip, and skip tall. Are you game to try the raffle?"

"I am ready, but how is it about yourself? You have been brought into this solely on my account, and I would not have harm happen to you while trying to aid me. Do not let it hurt your feelings, but I am afraid that flight on your part would be impossible."

"That's all right, miss. So you think, and so they think; but though I may be a rum one to look at, I'm a good one to go, and if you can keep up, I'm not afraid but what they will be left behind. Make up your mind about it, quick, for we'll never have a better chance than we have to-night, and if you can stand the trip we'll give them the slip, sure enough."

"My heavens! If there is even the shadow of a chance, lead the way. I have turned my brains thinking how an escape could be made without fighting past the guards, or leaving a trail behind which they could follow."

"A way there is—the same one I sent that other prisoner over. They didn't get on to it then, and like as not they won't get on to it now. I've been getting ready, and keeping a sharp look out. If you are sure you want to go, say the word."

"Yes, yes! A thousand times yes! The sooner we can start the better. Surely there are hiding places where we can elude their search, and perhaps your friends will come if they do not give it up. It is a desperate case, and we must take desperate risks."

Johnny held up his hand.

There was some little commotion below, and they heard the report of the pistol which Don Natan had fired as a decoy.

After a little came the sound of footsteps, as Patsy took his position, and the other men of the gang followed Carter down the gorge.

The placing of the sentinel was something new, which alarmed the girl. It seemed to her it destroyed their chance, since they could not leave the niche without passing him.

Johnny had quietly sunk down, and in a moment his form was lost in the gloom which lay beyond the faint circle of light sent out by the now smouldering fire. He had vanished as silently and mysteriously as he had come.

Molly Horton clasped her hands together, and could hardly repress a cry.

Just when she had gathered hope and strength for escape it seemed she had been left alone. She had no idea but that her friend had lost heart, and was seeking to return to his old quarters.

A moment later she heard a sound

which gave her another surprise, and almost as cruel a one. There was a noise she could not help but recognize as having been made by a blow; then, a groan and a fall. Was Johnny, or was the guard, the victim?

Another moment answered the question, for she heard the voice of the lame one just at her side.

"Hated to do it, for Patsy wasn't the worst fellow in the world. It was neck or nothing, and down he went. I hit hard enough to keep him quiet for a time; but perhaps his skull is safe, and if he comes to I have an idea he will never know what hit him."

"He will know only too well if he finds us here; and if he does not, his companions will."

"That's just what I am counting on. They'll figure on it we had to knock him down to get past, and that we took the trail out, or else are hiding somewhere down in the gulch. It'll do 'em good to look around there, and won't do us any hurt. I'm putting up good money on it they don't find which way we went before morning. One blessing—we haven't got many traps to pack. This way."

"Give me your hand. Unless we keep together I will be lost."

"Here it is, and it belongs to an honest man, if he couldn't find anything better to do than drive extra on the Gold Bank stage route, and look after the teams between times."

Molly gave the hand she grasped a reassuring clasp, and together the two turned and sought the rear of the little niche which had been the girl's prison.

There was a crevice which opened out well up in the rocky wall. She had noted it, but thought it impracticable, and not likely to lead to the open air.

Johnny knew differently. It was not an easy route to travel, but it brought them out to a narrow ledge on the face of the wall of the gorge, and then led away to the upper air. It was, in part, the route taken by Mount Albyn when, assisted by Johnny, he had made his escape, and though the lame driver did not know what fate might have befallen him, he was willing to trust to the same chance. The outlaws had been baffled before, and perhaps they would be again. He gave one last warning.

"I want you to understand that when it comes to prowling around by night we are going to strike a path that is none of the safest; but if you trust to me I can take you through all right. I've been over the worst of the ground myself and know how it lies."

"Lead the way, and never fear but what I will follow as you direct," came the ready answer. "In the darkness I must trust altogether to you."

"And just as well it is that you can't see. There's spots where, if you haven't the strongest kind of a head, you might get the flutters and tumble over. It's just as easy to walk a plank a hundred feet from the ground as it is on the sod, but when you see where you are you don't think so. This way, and keep your right elbow against the rock. There's no danger you will press so hard it will sweep you off."

Their whispering was perhaps not the wisest thing in the world, but Johnny was anxious to know the temper of his charge, who was leaning against the wall of stone, with a path not a yard wide under her feet, and a fall of fifty feet or more beyond.

Progress was necessarily slow, for even the guide had to depend almost entirely on his sense of feeling, and here and there were narrower points in the gradually rising path, which had to be passed with redoubled caution.

Now and then they came for a little while into the moonlight, and could get an indistinct view of their surroundings, but for the most part continued their way by the sense of touch.

They moved out of the dangerous neighborhood sooner than they thought for, and, reaching the crown of the wall, found themselves on a natural path, lead-

ing along the edge of the gorge for some distance, after which it was lost in still higher ground.

To the right lay uneven, ragged ground, over which it would be almost impossible to continue their flight by night, and they moved on in the direction fate seemed to have decided they must go.

There was no danger now that they could be seen from the canyon whence they had lately escaped, and though they turned their ears back now and then, in an instinctive effort to catch the sound of possible pursuit, for the most part their attention was altogether given to the road they were traveling. They had passed beyond the limit of Johnny's knowledge, and knew really nothing of what they were to meet.

The path led them up to the rising ground they had seen in their front, and then went on, apparently into the heart of the mountain. If it had been possible they would have turned aside; but no other route now seemed open to them, and once more they were swallowed up in the darkness.

Away above them they could see a narrow rift in the walls of rock, through which shone the stars, but they could no longer advance with even the limited freedom of their previous progress. It seemed as though already they had been hours in this bewildering gorge, where side by side they felt their way.

It was when the darkness ahead seemed to suddenly melt into a subdued but growing light that their first mishap came.

Molly Horton's foot dropped suddenly, she gave a little cry, Johnny threw his arm around her waist, there was a struggle, short, hard and ineffectual, and the two went dropping downward together.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MAN ON THE LEDGE.

There could be no thought of treachery in the mind of the Black Don, for the surprise and anger of Chess Carter were too deep to be feigned.

Besides, the situation spoke for itself. Patsy was no stranger to Don Natan, who recognized him at the first glance. Some one had been there before them, and rescued the prisoner. Perhaps, even, had passed them as they came hither in the darkness.

Johnny had made no mistake in his guess at what would be the first thought of Chess Carter.

"Curses on it! The girl is gone. Some one has helped her away, for she never could have struck this blow herself. They could not have got out of the gorge, and they must be somewhere down below. Can it have been the infernal driver? I will give the alarm to the guards. If they have not passed as yet they cannot get away, though they may hide among the rocks until morning. Watch and listen till I come back."

In his excitement the man from Canada had thrown aside once more the uncountness of his speech, though, with the Black Don that did not count for much, as he already knew the Sport of Gold Bank was more or less playing a part before the men of that camp.

He hastened away, leaving Natan with the unconscious man.

The Don was wise enough to think it might be best to make haste slowly.

Seeing a few coals of the smouldering fire, he stirred them up and found more fuel. Then he dragged the body toward its rising flame and examined it carefully.

There was still a faint action of the heart, and in spite of the blood, he seemed to have been stunned rather than injured by the wound. Natan found a jug of water, and had his pocket flask. When the time came he thought he would be able to revive the man, at least enough to have him tell his story, nor was he mistaken.

Before Carter had returned Patsy was speaking in a feeble way.

Fortunately for the fugitives, he was drawing on his imagination, and that

was serving him but poorly, though the story told was one easy enough to be believed.

According to that, shortly after the guard had taken his position, and when he was anticipating no danger some one stole up from below and attacked him in the dark. The girl had come rushing out from the niche, and after that he received a blow, and all was blank.

Though it was difficult to make a search of the gorge by night, yet it was given a thorough ransacking by Carter and some of his men, while the Don raved around for a time, and then sullenly brooded by himself.

He had no evidence, but more than half suspected, that his present ally had played him false. He knew nothing in regard to this spot, and for the present was compelled to leave the matter in the hands of Carter and his men, who were as much at fault as himself.

Even when the search was abandoned, the latter was not at all inclined to believe the fugitives could have escaped. Because they were not to be found was no evidence they were not dodging behind the rocks and among the shadows. With a little good fortune they might be able to elude twice as many men as those engaged in the search.

When morning came it would be a different matter, and provided that meantime they did not slip past the guards there would be little trouble in searching out their hiding place.

So it seemed; but when morning came the trouble had not ended, by any means. The men who had been on guard were sure no one had passed out through the only avenue known to them, while no sign could be found of the pair.

The Don watched keenly, and was at last sure that his ally was not trying to deceive him, but was thoroughly at fault.

When he knew that he took the matter in hand himself, and with the spot where Molly had been imprisoned as a starting point began his investigations. It seemed hardly possible the girl could disappear, and yet leave no traces of whither she went, or how.

He came upon the crevice in course of time, and though, from the floor of the cave, it looked impracticable, yet it was worth while to investigate it, and when that was done the mystery was solved. There could be no longer any doubt as to how the girl had made her escape.

The two looked at each other in angry disgust, for Carter had been the Don's sole companion in his renewed search, and without hesitation or waiting for more company the two made their way through the crevice, and along the narrow path followed by the fugitives the night before.

Once on the trail, it was almost impossible to lose it.

Unless the girl had fallen over into the canyon, which soon began to assume the form of a chasm, she would without doubt go straight forward, and where she had gone they could follow. There were no footprints, or articles dropped in the flight, but they knew they were on the right course, and pushed their way forward with thrice the speed of the pair who had preceded them.

"Ah, I know something of the ground before us," exclaimed the Don, at length, as the path between the overhanging hills opened out before them.

"If they have not turned and come back they are in the trap. Once before I visited this spot."

"Have they far to go?"

"That depends. They may have stopped the next quarter mile. If not, they have gone much farther than we care to follow. It is better if they have."

It was not hard to understand the meaning of the Black Don, though Carter was not convinced.

"She didn't run this route 'thout some un' to lead her, an' we ain't sure how many ov him ther are. Better, mebbe, one ov us stays hyer on guard, an' ther other goes back an' brings up some ov ther boys. Thar might be a worse place in ther world than this fur an ambush."

"We want none of them to see what we shall see. Thou and I, alone, must run this trail to the end. Two might pass and leave no sign, but three would have left a track of some kind. Rest easy. At the worst it will be but one man to two, since the girl does not count."

They talked low, and kept keen watch. By daylight the path was gloomy, but they could see where their feet were to be planted, and could search out the lurking places along the way.

Ahead of them they saw the clear sky, and the ending of the pass. Carter imagined there had been a mistake, yet the Don's knowledge served him well.

"If we find them at all we find them now," he muttered, and pointed downward, where the path ended in a sheer descent.

"They came here, unsuspecting, in darkness and haste. There the trail ceased—did they go on? Look over cautiously and see."

It required something of caution. Chess Carter could see that.

Moreover, a touch of the hand, almost, would be enough to leave but one standing on the rock, and he did not trust the Black Don too much.

It was only for an instant he hesitated. If there was to be treachery a little caution here could not stop it. He dropped on his knees, and craned his neck over the brink. Only a few seconds of it before he drew back with a shiver, but in that time he had obtained a view of all that he sought.

The two fugitives had gone down. Lame Johnny seemed to have been the more fortunate, since he had stopped on the way, and was huddled on a narrow ledge, not more than twenty feet below.

So far as advance or retreat was concerned, it might as well have been a hundred. The wall above him was not exactly perpendicular, but it was so steep it afforded little or no footing, and the position was too precarious to risk any doubtful experiments.

And below him a score of yards, he had caught a glimpse of something lying among the rocks, just barely to be seen beyond the jutting ledge upon which Johnny was seated, and which he recognized as a bit of Molly Horton's dress. In the time he looked at it there was not a sign of movement, and he doubted not the girl was either unconscious or dead. If not, she never would have remained in that cramped position, close to the precipice, when she had a clear way to move on.

"They are there," he said, soberly, as he moved back and looked up at Don Natan.

"How?"

"Look for yourself."

The Don smiled scornfully and stepped forward. He was not given to nerves, and though he suspected what he might be called upon to witness he never hesitated.

It took him even less time than it had done Chess Carter. When he drew back he placed his hand on his revolver.

"It looks as though the girl would never trouble us again; but the man is living. What shall be done with him?"

"Better save him up ter prove it. You haven't come inter ther game yet, as fur as he knows, an' I'm willin' ter take my chances. He kin learn his little story if he's paid fur it, and keep so close to ther truth his word kin never be doubted."

"Dead men tell no tales at all, but it may be thou art right. We will try him. Hail him and see what he has to say."

Again Chess Carter looked over the edge, and at his call Johnny started and looked upward.

"Whar's the woman who war with yer?"

"In Heaven, I'm afraid. We took the tumble together, but I stopped here, while she went the whole shute. She hasn't even groaned since."

"What infernal nonsense got inter yer? Couldn't yer wait till yer pards were heard from? If she's dead it's your

fault. Are yer sure she's gone up the flume?"

"Mighty sure, ef looks go for anything. You can see for yourself."

Johnny gave a glance over the ledge and pointed downward. From where he was a much better view could be obtained of what lay below.

"Keep yer courage up, and we'll throw down a rope. If you can't climb it, we'll draw you up. We'll have ter go back fur a longer piece afore we kin reach ther girl."

The Don dropped the noose of his lasso carelessly over the shoulders of the driver, and he was soon assisted to the ground above. Then the three began to retrace their steps.

CHAPTER XXXI.

JIMMY'S INSTINCT.

Perhaps the pair of fugitives had abated the caution with which they had moved at exactly the wrong moment, or the accident might have been avoided.

At the same time, if they had discovered the pitfall in time—which was the bed of an occasional watercourse—it would have made their capture almost certain the following morning.

It was not a straight drop, but the two went half sliding, half dropping, down the steep decline, until suddenly there was a wrench, and the two fell apart.

Johnny had landed squarely in the ledge, and if he had been anticipating the shock he might have even saved his companion. As it was, with his wits all abroad from the suddenness of the catastrophe, his arms unclasped, and Molly went on downward.

Fortunately, however, the momentary stoppage proved her salvation.

It turned her course, and sent her sliding rather than falling, and in a somewhat different direction.

Farther on down there were some bushes growing out from the crevices of the rock, and through these she plunged, her speed materially checked. She reached the bottom of the slide, bruised somewhat, and badly shaken, but without any serious injury, though she might have taken the trip a hundred times without coming to so little damage.

She heard the anxious voice of Johnny calling to her, and when she had regained her breath, and her heart had ceased to so outrageously flutter in her mouth, she answered him. The dangers successfully passed through were not so patent, but a few words of explanation convinced both that it would be better to wait for morning before either of them attempted to move from the places where fate had anchored them. As it was not long now until daybreak, they resigned themselves patiently to the delay.

It was well they did so, for when morning dawned they could see just what a providential thing had happened. The wrench which had torn the girl out of Johnny's grasp had flung her away from the more dangerous route immediately below the ledge, and had she then deviated a yard on either side she could hardly have escaped death. Even by daylight Jack Hannon shuddered when he saw what she had done, and drew back from trying the slide himself. If he could have been sure of striking the exact spot where Molly Horton began her downward course he would not have feared, but he knew his own infirmity, and the impossibility of taking the leap with any certainty. He hesitated, drew himself up in a crouching position, and stared gloomily down into the narrow valley which opened up before him.

He had to think over the situation, and while he was thinking the two suddenly learned they were no longer alone.

They heard the steady click-clack of a set of little hoofs along the hard bed of the natural roadway which led to the spot, and, looking eagerly in the direction of the sound, saw a sleek-limbed burro, nose down and tail up, coming on in a way that indicated business.

The animal was riderless, but was saddled and bridled, and acted as though it had escaped from its owner, and was traveling a road that was not altogether unfamiliar.

It looked neither to the right hand nor to the left, though after a little it hastened its steps, and finally, turning to one side, it halted, and thrust its nose still farther downward. What it really did was to push its muzzle into a spring and take a long, refreshing draught.

Then, after a trifle of meditation as to whether this was the exact brand desired, the burro took numerous other draughts, swelling visibly, until he seemed almost to have reached the bursting point.

The two watched him at first with something more than curiosity.

Molly had an idea that the owner might be within sight, and peered anxiously in the direction whence he had come, but Johnny saw salvation in the chance.

"He got loose from some camp in the night and headed straight for water. They can smell it twenty miles. When he is full and has rested a trifle he will go straight back to his owner. Such a thing often happens. Try and catch him, and he will take you with him. He belongs to a prospector, and if I know anything about him from the looks of his beast, he will take care of you and guide you back to the settlements. As for me—it's just as well this thing happened. I have doubts of being able to make the tramp, and it might have been the death of both of us."

"What is it that you mean? Surely, I would never desert you. We made our escape together, and together we will die, if need be."

"Don't talk about dying. Sooner or later they will come in pursuit, and will get me out of this hopple."

"To kill you, most likely."

"No danger of that. I am the only man in the camp that can cook for a cent; and if I tip them a little lie or two to straighten things I wouldn't wonder if they would make me captain of the gang in course of time. Catch the burro first, and reason about it afterward."

The burro was still drinking, and Molly stepped boldly toward him. She never had had much experience with that kind of an animal. She took the best course, by marching up to it with hesitation, and was just about to put her hand on the bridle when a whistle rang through the valley.

The burro lifted its head calmly, glanced down the trail by which it had come, and then suddenly turned its heels in the direction of the young lady, at the same time laying back its ears in a threatening attitude.

Molly shrank back, but it was more from surprise at the whistle than fear of the animal. She looked around for a hiding place, or a good line of retreat, but saw neither; and, with Johnny Hannon perched up there in plain sight, it hardly seemed worth while to make an effort at escape. Before her mind was made up the giver of the whistle appeared at some little distance, plodding forward doggedly, though now and then staggering from side to side. When he caught sight of the burro he tried to hasten his steps, but reeled more than ever. There might have been a dozen Mollies in the background, and he would have seen none of them.

At the last moment he stumbled and fell forward, but it was with his face to the water, and he drank more eagerly, even, than the burro had done.

Life and strength came back to him with the draughts, and when he turned and looked up Molly and the burro stood side by side, staring down at him.

"Howly Moses, is this a ghost Oi see forinst me?"

"Not nearly so much of one as you seemed to be, though there is no telling what it might have been if we had all waited a trifle longer. I have just made my escape from some outlaws."

"Thin, be the powers, it's Molly Horton yez are, afther all, an' Oi'm Michael Dugan. Do yer remimber the toimes ov owld?"

"Thank heaven! we have found a friend! Do I remember you? Of course I do; and it was while I was searching for you that I got into this trouble. Had it not been for my friend up there it might have had a worse ending before this."

She pointed to Hannon, perched on the rocks.

"Sure, an' it's Lame Johnny, av me eyes don't desave me, an' it wor for yez both we wor a lookin'. More be towken it's lost meself Oi have been the last day an' two noights. If Oi had not touned Jimmy loose for the wather it's shtarved wid thourst Oi wad have bin altogether. But he'll take us out foiner az a fiddle, an' av yer riddy it's betther be shtartin' we had."

When the situation was explained to Mickey he was puzzled. It was impossible to give any help to the driver, while it was not safe to linger longer for fear of the appearance of the outlaws.

"Sure, an' av yez won't troie the lape, there's nothin' but to lave yez on dhe perch whole Oi foiner dhe rist, an' put Miss Molly in safety. Thin we'll come back an' risky ye av yer still there. An' av not, we'll have a scalp or so, an' yez kin doie happy for the thinkin' av it."

The arrangement was made in haste, and it was Michael who thought of the expedient of arranging a fragment of dummy, just barely in sight from above. With a farewell to Johnny they went away just in the niche of time. They were not out of hearing, and barely out of sight, when Don Natan and Chess Carter made their appearance in the pass above. Mickey observed what happened from a chink in a rock at the turn of the passage, and drew a long breath as he saw Hannon assisted up, and the trio depart.

Yet, he did not altogether trust appearances, and remained on the watch a while longer.

By so doing he had a chance to see the Black Don quietly steal back.

The Mexican evidently was not exactly satisfied in his mind. He stooped, leaned over, and tried his best to get a better view of what he saw just below him. Finally, as though without reflection, and inspired by a sudden impulse, he drew his revolver and fired several shots.

The bit of Miss Molly's coat received the bullets without flinching. Satisfied with that, Natan went away as though for good, leaving behind him, in Mickey's mind, little doubt of what he would do in case he could come face to face with his niece, and the circumstances were favorable for working his will.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BIG BONANZA.

Chess Carter looked somewhat sober when the three turned away from the spot after the rescue of Lame Johnny.

He was not a man given to soft feelings, and he had seen a good many dead men in his time; but even his steady nerves had been a little shaken with the idea of Molly Horton lying mangled at the foot of the rocks.

It is possible this very thought was the salvation of the driver. Under ordinary circumstances a man who had played such a trick on Chess Carter could expect little mercy.

They went along silently enough, but before they had gone very far the Don halted.

"Go on, thou, for a little. I will rejoin thee. Something tells me to go back and take another look. It is possible there has been some mistake."

He gave a cold glance at Johnny, and, without awaiting for an answer, went on his way.

Chess Carter's look was colder still.

"Young man, I reckon ef she's really dead there'll be a rope sickness. We're not saying much tell we see jest what

you've bin doin' but fur a man thet leads a confidin' woman ter death, without knowin' why er wharfore, thar's nothin' he don't deserve—an' he'll be apt ter git it in our camp."

"Rats!" replied Johnny, cheerfully.

"Wait till after the funeral, and the Black Don will be giving me a dollar and letting me go."

Carter's answer was interrupted by the sound of a revolver shot, and Johnny went on:

"The Don is firing a salute, right now—I only hope he ain't hitting the corpse. He is one of your hot-headed fellows, who get bewildered and don't exactly know what they are doing. It's a blessed thing Miss Horton is beyond being hurt."

"What do you mean by that?"

"If the fall hadn't killed her, the Don would be finishing the job."

"You seem ter know a heap more about the party than I do; how does it come yer so chipper a sizin' him up?"

"I haven't been driving stage off and on for a dozen years for nothing. I have met half the bad men this side of the coast, and the Black Don has held me up more than once. I have him down fine, saying nothing of what the poor young woman has been telling me."

It was on the tongue of Canada Chess to ask what the young lady had said, but Don Natan came gliding back, a strange look on his face, and he reserved his questions.

It took courage to follow those two along the backward trail, when it came to passing along the narrow ledge between those two, but Johnny gave no signs of suspicion; and perhaps he felt all the safer that Carter was in the rear. A push or a trip would send him off where there would be nothing to break his fall, and the escape of the night before could not be repeated.

His lips, perhaps, compressed a little, as he decided that if he went he would not go alone, but his face did not pale, and, fortunately, the dangerous track was passed without any foul play on the part of his captors. He found himself once more in the camp from which he had but so lately escaped.

To the surprise of Natan and his friend, they found but one man there—the fellow who has already been introduced to the reader as Roper.

By right there should have been half a dozen.

Natan gave a sharp glance around.

"What means this, Roper? Where are the men?"

"Some fool play, sich ez kin be looked fur when ther boss are away. They've struck et rich, an' hev nigh onto about concluded to quit bizniss. Ef they ain't brung down ter dots, ets like ter be a end ov ther gang."

"What is thy meaning? Surely, they have not all gone on a wild-goose chase? Explain."

"Some started fust, an' some started last; but they all got there. Thar hed bin some pow-wow over a rich chunk ov ther preshus that they hed found whar they reckoned a pris'ner they hev had drapped it. An' sum ov 'em jest thought ov takin' a squint about whar they picked ther galoot up. Thunder, boss! They found gold thar by ther cubic yard, an' hev gone out ter gether up a ton. Say, it's a heap sight better than road-agentin', an' not half ez dangerous."

Chess Carter turned an angry glance on Lame Johnny.

"You ought to have heard something of all this; is there anything in it?"

"A true bill, pard. They picked up the party just after they struck the camp, and he got away from 'em. They found a regular dornick in his bed chamber, but I reckoned they had made up their minds it was only a specimen he had stole somewhere and was carrying around for ballast. If they have struck much more like it they'll all be rich enough to reform and go to Congress. I wouldn't wonder if they were making out a ticket now."

"Whereabouts is this spot?"

"Can't prove it by me. I wasn't frolicing around with the gang when they picked him up, and I'm sorry to say I never could induce them to give me their confidence. They confined me strictly to the tea and gravy line."

The Black Don heard, and spoke grumly:

"A nice mess thou hast made of it; and well it is that we have no longer business here. Doubtless there will be a thousand men on the ground before the week ends. The one who escaped will bring an army; and they will come prepared to fight. Thou and I had better get away from here while the way is open. As I have some need still for my men, I would that I could take them along, though I fear they will be hard to move until the madness wears off."

"A day at the pick and shovel would settle that. They will be ready to follow their gallant leader once more."

"A day! Carramba! I would not linger here an hour for the best of them. What is to be done with this man? He knows too much unless he can be bought, and if this story of the Roper be true, it will not be possible to leave him here. Shall I close his mouth, or wilt thou? Settle it quick, for I would visit this newly found bonanza before we start for that other point thou knowest of."

"For what did yer rescue him ef yer means killin' now?"

"It might have been that for him there could have been found a use, but I know him better already."

"Roper, I leave him in thy hands for a little; see that he makes no escape like that of the other prisoner. He can be used. Bring him with thee, and lead us to the place where the men can be found."

"Ef I got onter what they said, I reckon I kin find ther spot."

Johnny was not sure he wanted to accompany them; yet even that was better than instant death. When he found he was to be carried on horseback, though the Roper's noose was around his neck, he was not so unwilling to go. He had said nothing to the threats of Don Natan and offered no word of objection now.

The journey was not a long one to make, and the trail left behind by the outlaws was plain enough to follow without other guide.

In an hour they had reached the place where Euphroze Mount Albyn had been captured; and by taking the same approach the outlaws had used succeeded in coming upon the men in the same way.

Before they were aware of his presence the Black Don had stepped out, holding the drop.

Half a dozen men were clustered over a slight excavation they had made, and were looking downward with exclamations of delight. They had been unearthing a cropping, and it seemed to them they had struck a lead at almost the first trial. The Black Don was forgotten until they heard his voice, harsh and stern:

"As you are, hands up! The man who feels for a weapon dies!"

At the same time they caught the sound of the clicking of his revolvers as the hammers were forced back.

They knew he would shoot as he said, and that when he offered a shot it was fairly certain it would not be wasted.

The hands went up as though moved by clockwork, and each man turned on his heel to face the chief.

"The meaning of this? Carlos, thou hast a straight tongue, speak for the rest."

"Chief, it is gold. Somewhere there is a vein almost of the purest, and we think we have found the mother rock. It lieth somewhere near, and we have seen a bit that was almost the pure ore."

"And if that be so, who gave thee leave to desert thy post? We are not gambusinos. If we stop to tap every creestone there might be a merry hang-

ing batch before many days, when those who turned out to search had found us. I left thee on guard. What is the reward of him who leaves his post?"

Carlos bowed his head and made no answer. It was sometimes more dangerous to respond to a question of the chief than to leave the answer to himself.

Though the Americans and Mexicans of the band were none too cordial in their associations, one of the former spoke up:

"Ther wust ye kin put a man to, chief, are ter kill him. He ain't doin' himself ary good, an' he's useless ter ther rest of ther world. We just drug Carlos off, leavin' ther Roper ter take ther duty ov all ov us tell yer got back an' could give orders. Ef yer drops him you got ter lay us alongside ov him; an' I ain't sayin' it meanin' ary disrespect, but jest ez ther termmernation we've kim to."

"Is it worth the risk?" asked the captain, dryly.

"We're takin' et; an' frum what we've see we think she are."

"Enough of this talk! Willing I am to overlook a trifle so that you return to duty, but for the present there is no time for this. Cover up this find, and the secret will remain safe. Within a month the band will dissolve, and then thou canst march hither and dig if it so suits."

"Thar war a chap found et already, an' he'll be back afore that time, an' creation behind him."

"He is here now; but there are but three or four who come with him, or have heard. They will neither stay here, nor will they go back. Obey orders and it will be the better for you all."

The Don spoke all too calmly, though some few of the men were deceived.

"Be blamed ef we will!" exclaimed the American, suddenly dropping his hand to his belt; and on the instant the Don pulled trigger.

The fellow dropped with a crash, but before another move could be made in the game Chess Carter sprang forward, his revolver in his hand, but exclaiming:

"This is no time to quarrel among ourselves. You fools, you, look!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AT THE END OF A ROPE.

The diversion of Canada Chess came none too soon. These men were half crazed with the lust for gold, and only old-time habits of obedience had held them back.

As their comrade fell an angry snarl went round the crowd, but, fortunately, the voice of Chess Carter rose above it.

Every man looked as he pointed, and found there had been no trick to throw them off their guard, but a warning well worth the heeding.

From the rocks up the side of the gorge three men were looking down upon them.

They were beyond pistol range; but these interlopers carried Winchesters and looked as though they were half inclined to use them without knowing what the quarrel was.

Carter recognized two of them at once.

"And who dost thou call those?"

"It's ther Man from Sandrock; an' that taller man's ther finder ov ther prospect—ther one what escaped from ther valley. You kin gamble on it they don't come ez friends, an' ef they can't drive us out, they'll bring enough backin' ter make it sure."

"An' that kiddish young cuss are ther one we roped, an' thet got clean away. Boss, I wouldn't wonder ef they war huntin' fur more ner pay rock. Mebbe you'd like ter call 'em down an' explain."

The Roper broke in, for Hal Keene was of the party above, and his presence seemed to show a double motive in their presence there.

"Thou art right," answered the Don, slowly, and looking over the ground with the keen eye of a strategist.

"While they live we will hardly be allowed to enjoy our find in peace. But it seems to me as though they were in a trap. They cannot force their way to us, and there is higher ground we can gain, but which cannot be reached by them. Pity it is to lose the time, but they must be attended to first of all."

It was Carlos this time who gave warning; and the sight that he pointed out was one which for the moment paralyzed the Black Don, and made even Chess Carter turn cold, though for the others it had no such supernatural look.

A little party had approached from behind, and while they were staring at Soft Velvet and his companions had succeeded in slipping by, and were now already steering up the narrow path of rising ground which led upward to the trio in waiting. There was a smooth-limbed burro, scampering along as though it thought his life depended on it; by his side ran Mickey Dugan, with one hand holding to a saddle flap and the other flourishing a revolver, while mounted on the little animal was no less a personage than Miss Molly Horton herself.

It might be possible that Don Natan had left her dead under the shadow of the overhanging rock, but if so, this was a wraith which could not be distinguished from the original.

The confusion was only momentary, but it served the purpose of the fugitives well. They were not out of danger, but at least they were between their friends and the outlaws, and if they were reached at all it had to be from behind.

A bullet could still stop them, and when Natan's first superstitious shock had worn off his hand was ready. No ghost was this, but the girl he had seen some weeks before, seeking information of Gold Bank, whom he had missed then, and once since by chance, and whom he had, as he thought, left dead. To his surprise, Chess Carter blocked his game.

"Take her, ef you kin, but it's got ter be fair play. You try ter shoot her down afore they show fight an' I'll drop yer whar yer stands. She wasn't brought hyer fur sich a game, an' I won't have it."

"After them! Capture them!" exclaimed the Don, changing his mind on that warning.

"Beware how they are harmed, but see they do not escape."

He led the way himself in a headlong rush, while his men followed after with a readiness which seemed to show that the late unpleasantness was altogether forgotten.

The start which Mickey had was not much to brag of, and now that the course lay up the rather steep ascent his progress could not be so rapid. Loaded as it was, the burro at its best could hardly hold its own. Dugan saw the crisis would soon be there, and spoke in a low tone between his gasps for breath:

"Kape yer courage up, Molly darlint, an' whin Jimmy shtops lape down an' roun on. Ye'll mate our friends half way, an' they'll be afther takin' care av yez, whoile Jimmy an' Oi howld the pass. Sure, an' it's a grate toime we'll be afther havin', an' whin Oi say yez are safe we'll retrate oursilves."

The time for the stand—if any was to be made—came. Natan and his men were panting close behind, and there was no hope for the present from the friends above. A bullet from them would be more apt to strike friend than foe.

Right here the way was narrow, and just beyond it turned slightly, so that for a time one might be sheltered. At a signal the burro stopped as though shot, while Molly, already prepared for the shock, sprang to the ground and hurried forward, without a single backward glance. Unarmed as she was, she would only be a weakness in Michael's plans of defense, and her only way of rendering assistance was to get out of the chance of capture as rapidly as possible.

Mickey turned with the stick in his hand, which had been his companion in all his wanderings. Firearms he had, but with a wisdom born of the emergency, he decided it was best for him not to begin their use. He pushed himself in between the burro and the rock, and threw himself on guard.

"Kim on, ye bluddy shpalpeens. Sure, an' it's dyin' Oi am for a bit av diversion, an' the chance av it makes me fale good all over. Ah, wad ye, ye brute?"

He gave a swift turn of the wrist, and his stick came down with a resounding thump on the head of the leading man of the pursuers, who was trying to dart straight into a close.

"An' how did yez loike that? It's plinty more there are lift av the same sort."

He was on guard again, as he spoke, and was flourishing his stick with the graceful ease natural to him, and which few men could equal. He would have liked nothing better than to have had them all armed with clubs, and then taken them one at a time.

The outlaws were not much shaken by his bold front. After standing fire as often as they had done there did not seem much harm in a stick, and as the man down crawled out of the way three more were ready to take his place, and dashed at Mickey with a vehemence that promised success. He could not knock them all down before the hands of at least one of them would be at his throat.

Again was the sound of a thump, but the fellow to whom it was given was game as a pebble, and throwing up his hand, managed to catch hold of the stick, to which he held with a death grasp. His companions uttered a cry of triumph, and threw themselves upon the Irishman, who was tugging away to get his shillelagh loose. It looked as though they were going to overwhelm him.

But that was counting without Jimmy.

The burro did not intend to be left out of the game, but lashed out with both feet, so to speak, straight from the shoulder.

His little hoofs described a direct line through the air, and were planted where they could do the most good. If anything, he hit harder than his master; and Mickey had distinguished himself, for he had just brought down Don Natan himself.

In a hand-to-hand rough and tumble the man and his burro might have held their own with the gang. It remained for the Roper to save the fortunes of the day.

He whirled his rope around his head, and, casting from below with marvelous strength, caught Dugan in the noose and twitched him fairly from the path.

At the same time there was a more vicious rush than ever, and Jimmy was a prisoner also. The moment Mickey left his side he ceased to struggle, so that his capture was not difficult.

The Don would have sent the charge on up in pursuit of the girl, but, looking after her, found it was now too late. She had already been met by the enemy, who, with Winchesters poised, were ready to open fire upon the first hint of a move in her direction.

"Back men!" he ordered. "They are ready to shoot, and that is not our game just now."

"And what are yer goin' ter do with ther Irishman?" asked the Roper, coming forward with his prisoner, as Don Natan stood once more in the gorge.

"Drag him to yonder tree. Carramba! I shall hang him from the back of his own burro. No man shall strike Natan and live!"

No threats of the Black Don's were idle ones, and he meant what he said, and that his order should be obeyed. Before Mickey fairly understood the fate intended for him he found the end of a lasso had been swung over the limb of the tree and drawn taut, while he stood upon the back of the burro, waiting for the fatal moment when the animal should pass from under him.

"Now go!" cried the Don, as he struck the burro with the stick he had wrenched from Mickey's hand.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"ALL OF THEM!"

If the Don had been around on several occasions when that same stick had been applied to Jimmy he might have hesitated about using it himself.

With a man on its back the burro was ready to submit to any amount of pounding as part of the performance.

But a man behind him was a different thing, and the chances were he would at once proceed to take his own part.

At the order to move Jimmy's front quarters never budged, but his hinder parts elongated after the fashion which had proved so disastrous to Mickey at the Blazing Star.

For fully a minute the Don had positively nothing to say. The viciousness with which Jimmy had shot out his heels up there, when trying to hold the pass alongside of his master, was nothing to the triphammer force with which he planted both hoofs on the breast of the already furious Mexican.

"Oi sh'd remark, he got dherye wid both fate!" chirruped Mike, with a ghastly grin.

In an instant, however, he saw his chance.

The Black Don had been flung half a dozen yards backward, striking the ground with a force which of itself would have knocked the breath out of the average man, and his followers, while rushing toward him to pick him up, were half strangled with the suppressed laughter they dared not utter.

Jimmy stood like a rock, and the rope was a trifle slack. At the worst, an effort could do no harm, and one hand was not bound half as securely as the outlaws, in their haste, had thought.

He wrenched the wrist loose, the cords dropping from the other as this came free, and hastily cast off the noose from his neck.

"Git, Jimmy, av ye loves me," he murmured, dropping astride, with his face toward the outlaws and the burro's tail; and, without hesitation or further urging, Jimmy dashed away.

As he went, Mickey whipped out a revolver which had been hidden under his coat. So far he had refrained from shooting, but he thought it would come to that now; nor was he mistaken.

His flight failed to attract attention at the outset, because no one had eyes for him, and he was supposed to be reasonably secure.

By the time he had gone a dozen yards some one had a glimpse of him and a shout arose, followed by a couple of hasty shots.

Then Mickey pulled his own trigger, and the ball had opened.

The fugitive was not yet beyond easy shooting distance, and if he had been by himself it is possible that after the first flurry the outlaws would have done better work. The first discharges did no damage, and then one of the outlaws threw up his arms and dropped, while another winced as a ball grazed his shoulder. At the same time they heard the report of several rifles, and knew that Soft Velvet and his friends had opened fire from the higher ground.

Mickey was at once forgotten, while those who had been aiming at him wheeled about and took in the situation with magical speed. If the firing from above was kept up, to remain there was certain death.

Chess Carter had been watching the proceedings with folded arms and the air of one who did not consider the things going on to be any of his affairs. Now he came to the front.

From his breast he jerked out a white handkerchief, which he waved over his head, and at the same time uttered sharply his commands.

"Put away yer guns, an' git yer dead an' badly wounded under kiver. Them pards up thar ain't hungerin' fur a fight,

but they won't take a bluff, an' ther more yer tries ter raise 'em jest now ther surer they'll clean yer out. Bunch yer hands, an' lay low fur a new deal."

He motioned toward the Don and the other prostrate outlaw, and saw that Soft Velvet had brought his gun down, and was willing the temporary truce should be had.

The outlaws were no less agreeable. They snatched up their burdens with eager haste, and in a moment the whole party was out of sight from above. Lame Johnny having managed to slip away at the very opening of the fracas, and Mickey having promptly placed a jutting knoll between him and his adversaries, were out of sight and out of mind.

The Black Don had not been exactly insensible—at least, for more than a brief period of time—but between loss of the breath which had been kicked out of him and the dazing effect of the fall, he had known comparatively nothing of what was going on. It was rather a surprise when he fairly recovered his senses and found where he was, and that his men were actually in hiding.

"By the holy virgin, but some one must die!" he exclaimed, as he gathered himself up and glared around.

"Reckon yer 'bout right. Ther toughest question are ef it won't be us, with the rope 'round our necks. This time you've went an' gone an' done it, sure."

Carter spoke gloomily. He had no especial rage to vent—or, if any, it was at the Don, who had largely brought them into this position. He fancied if he had been running things the situation would have been entirely different.

"What dost thou mean?"

"That we better throw up our hands and get off this trail—that is, if we can drag the boys away."

"What! Run from three men? I have had a score on my trail before this, and they run from me, like whipped hounds."

"But this time you have ter deal with ther Sharp from Sandrock. He's played a mighty light hand so fur, an' now he's made his book he'll be willin' fur you ter draw off, an' call it even. Ef yer don't, he'll begin ter strike ter kill."

"Thou art afraid, then."

"Not afraid; but, say we wipe out ther hull gang. You think a little bird won't kerry ther news? If it does, it beats yer game, an' my sheer ov a million gits mighty slim. But I ain't sayin' you'll wipe 'em out so easy. You'll hev ter be in ther front rank when it's tried on; when Soft Velvet goes down he'll take three men with him, at least. Perhaps you'll be one ov 'em. Most like, I'll be another. Sence last night I've bin with you in this thing, an' I'll stay thar, but ef I had advice ter give I'd say, let 'em go, an' try it on a new line when yer gits breath ag'in."

"Thou art right in one thing. They must die, or we. This child's play must stop. When next we strike there must be no failure; and not one of them is to be left to tell what they have here seen."

"That's your say so, an' ef ther game are ter be played out I'm not sayin' et's not ther right platform; but thar's one thing yer furgittin'."

"And that?"

"Yer talkin' about ther next time; but so fur yer ain't struck at all, an' et looks ez though they hed checkmated afore yer got ready ter begin. How'll it be when ther Sharp gits down ter business?"

"I will show thee. If the thought of a little blood, and less danger, makes thee sick, stand aside. I can finish without thy aid; and there are certain matters between us I make sure will hold thy tongue."

"Drop that. Ez I said, I'm with you. How shall we git at them?"

The sport had dropped the easy courage he was accustomed to show when on his own stamping grounds, and seemed inclined to put the very worst face on the matter. And yet, he had not the courage to throw it up altogether.

Perhaps he only desired urging to keep him in a way which was nevertheless distasteful to him.

"There are with us here nigh to a dozen. If we need them a signal would bring in the rest of my band. If we but hold them in the vise as they are they must die; and if they try to pass out we can shoot them as they come. Thou hast seen blood before; why dost thou shudder at it now?"

"When Chess Carter shot a man it has always been in front."

"Thou canst try it that way again. After that, if the work be left for us, we will do it after our own fashion. Of one thing be sure. None of those yonder may leave these hills alive. Where is the man with the burro?"

The Don suddenly remembered the little diversion in which he was lately engaged.

"Both skipped out while we were picking you up. If we hadn't let them go the men on the mountain would have picked us off with their rifles. Carlos had already fallen."

"Saved me the trouble of knifing the villain."

"I got leave ter kerry you off—reckon they thought you war dead, er they might not have held up when thar war a chance ter scoop us all."

"And the lame one?"

"Skipped, too."

"Maledictions on them! Which way? Did they join the others on the mountain, or have they fled to the plain? It may mean life or death to know."

"Most likely they j'ined the Sandrock Sharp. One of my men staid back on the watch and will know."

"Find out. If they are on the plain, let them be followed and killed where found. If they have joined the others, it is well. We have them all in a cul de sac, from which there is but this one way. When they cross it, they die, all of them."

"The girl, too?"

"All of them."

CHAPTER XXXV.

BESIEGERS AND BESIEGED.

The Black Don spoke what he thought was the truth when he said they held the party in a trap, and he was not far from right.

He had explored his neighborhood somewhat during his roving, and though not hitherto acquainted with the gulch in which Chess Carter made his retreat, he had been over much of the ground beyond it, and at one time had followed up this very pass as far as he thought it practicable.

On the contrary, Canada Chess, who had prospected through these regions before, had failed to penetrate this cul de sac, as Natan called it, nor had he discovered any auriferous signs. Had he examined this valley carefully the whole tenor of his after life might have been different.

Yet, in a straight line the two valleys were scarcely a good rifle shot apart, were it not for the walls of rock which shut them in.

Euphroene Mount Albyn, as he called himself, knew a little more about the lay of the land than either of them, and he had made his discoveries of necessity. When Lame Johnny started him on a possible route of escape he was compelled to go straight ahead or die, and for that reason he felt no particular fears when he saw the outlaws arranging their forces so as to command the narrow outlet.

"It's to be a siege, I reckon," suggested Soft Velvet, as he read off the intentions of the enemy, carefully as they tried to conceal them.

"They ought to know what they are about, and it looks as though they thought they had us, and meant to keep us. I'd a heap sight sooner have war that was short and sharp than a waiting game, but if they think they can win on this, I suppose we'll have to let them go ahead. When it gets monotonous I'll just have to crawl down and clean out the camp."

"Ef we can't git out they can't git in; an' that'll make 'em too sick. They've

scented ther gold, an' when ther 'citement 'bout us dies down a leetle, that about it'll rise ag'in."

"That's what I'm afraid of, Frozzie. That's what I'm afraid of. They sit down there as though they meant to stay, and there's long odds against us."

"We kin stay as long ez they kin, an' that's what."

"We can stay long enough, provided we take the shape of angels; but while we are just flesh and blood they have the long end of the string. There's grub enough in our haversacks to rustle along with for a little, but they have the water with them, and before long it would be a very dry time for corn. About the hour the thirst gets up we'll have to go down and fight them in their intrenchments, unless we crawl in on them in the dark and do some wholesale murder, which is not exactly my style."

"That's whar they're fooled, an' you make yer mistake. Thar's water to be had fur ther takin' ov it; an' as fur grub—there's Mickey's mule. We kin jerk ther beef an' on a pinch it'll last us a week. Oh, I tell yer, we are jest sirene in this lay-out, an' we couldn't have et better ef we'd a asked fur et."

Mickey was there with his burro, and he heard the threat with alarm. It was the next thing to offering to slaughter Bridget and the children. He would almost as soon have trusted to the tender mercies of the Black Don himself as allow Mount Albyn to replenish the larder in the way proposed.

"Av it's atein' Jimmy that yez wor thinkin' ov, ye wor off yer aigs altogether, an' Oi would not have it at all, at all."

He bristled up as he spoke, and if he had not left his cudgel back with the outlaws would have been flourishing it wildly. Mentally he resolved he would look around him for another at the first convenient season.

"Don't be too sure of that, Mickey. We'd be most happy to starve to death to accommodate your charger, but there is the young lady to consider."

Soft Velvet spoke carelessly, but he did not think his voice could carry to the ears of Miss Molly, who was reclining a little distance away, resting herself after the terrors and the troubles of her flight. She sprang up and came forward.

"That is true; and for fear that in doing so you ruin yourselves, you must allow the young lady to consider for herself. Were it not for me you would not have been led into this risk; and, even now, could march away unharmed."

"And leave them here to hold possession of what I have found? Not for Euphroene. Going away, till they leave, is the very thing we don't want ter do."

"Well, then, you might remain. They would not interfere with five resolute men, unless there was a reason for it. I am that reason. I must not bring perhaps death and destruction to my friends."

"Don't think it, miss; don't think it. If you were in the South Sea Islands it would be all the same for us. They mean we shan't get away, and they have golden reasons for it. We intend that we shall, and if we take our time to it we shall see the how."

"They are two or three to your one, and when you attempt to move out they will have the advantage of position. There must be bloodshed at the least, and the chances will be against you."

"There's where you are wrong. The chances are just the other way. Half as many men only have half as many chances of getting hit; and as to sheer business, we could take in twice the crowd if we got the ball opened. By and by they will get a little careless, and then Tom and I will go down among 'em and clean up the catalogue. If I'm hesitating on it, it's not because there is any fear we won't get through; but because I've been in more than one of such scrapes, and what is left after it is over is not exactly the thing for a woman to look at. You may not believe it,

but it's more their account than ours that I have been thinking of."

"A dozen lives to be taken to protect me from a mere loss of money! I cannot think of it."

"Better not. Take things as easy as you can, and within the twenty-four hours we'll have you on the back track, safe and sound."

"But I know what sort of bargain I have to make, and since I see the alternative, I am ready for it. I am in no danger, for the very essence of the plot depends upon my getting my own. The offer was fairly made, and though I rejected it then, since I see what may be the cost I can no longer refuse. The man who had me brought hither, to separate me from my friends, and break the trail entirely, is, I shame to say it, my uncle."

"Nothing new in that, and there is where the danger lies. Say no more of this. When the time comes we will find a way out. If there are certain bodies left behind us, let the fault rest where it belongs."

Soft Velvet spoke positively, and waved his hand in token there was no more time for discussion.

Certain movements of the enemy required attention, and beyond that he saw evidences of a coming hysterical break-down if the conversation was continued on this line. No doubt she believed what she was saying, but the Sandrock Sharp had his own ideas as to what mercy Molly would receive if she cast her lot among the outlaws below.

As he knew nothing of the statements made by Canada Chess, he supposed she was referring entirely to the Black Don, and the cruelty of his tender mercies was proverbial.

Molly Horton had as much courage as the most, but she was a womanly woman, after all. The thought of all the bloodshed which might come sickened her. She ceased talking, but her mind was very nearly made up, and nothing which occurred during the course of the day had any tendency to change it.

It might have been possible for the besieged party to have made a retreat, but as yet the exigencies of the occasion did not require it, and after some little talk with Frozzie, the Sandrock Sharp, who was the natural leader, thought it would be better to delay the attempt. There was some danger of being overtaken in the defiles beyond; and there was yet another chance—that the Black Don might know of the route, and have an ambuscade ready to receive them, where their opportunity for defense would be nothing like what it was here.

Before moving at all he made up his mind that a reconnoissance should be made, so that he might not walk blindly into a trap.

Only once during the day was the armed truce broken.

As a test Soft Velvet crept cautiously down the trail for some distance, and then showed himself, rifle in hand.

Almost instantly there was the crack of a gun, and as he fell over backward a sharp yell of triumph arose from below.

As he had been on the alert, and fell at the flash, there was no harm done, though the bullet whizzed dangerously close. He turned over quickly and fired in the direction of the sound, but there was nothing to show his shot had taken effect.

One thing had been proven, the Black Don was on the watch, and did not intend them to escape. He had his designs on Molly Horton; and his men never would allow intelligence of the wonderful bonanza they fancied was hidden in these hills to reach the outside world.

When night came something of a barricade was erected on the path which led down to the valley, and a guard was stationed, while another watch was kept from the higher ground. Little danger was there that the sentinels would be caught napping, while those who slept did so on their arms.

Molly Horton had as convenient a resting place as could be found, some little distance in the rear of the others, and apparently had resigned herself to what was to come. No movement from either side was to be expected until a little before daybreak.

It was not far from midnight when Soft Velvet caught a glimpse of a figure flitting across the valley below.

He threw up his rifle—but lowered it without having pulled trigger. Unless he was strangely mistaken, it was the figure of a woman.

A strange suspicion darted across his mind. He rushed to the rude couch he had seen prepared for Molly Horton—and found it vacant.

CHAPTER XXXVI. MOLLY'S BARGAIN.

Soft Velvet was not in error when he fancied that he recognized the figure seen by moonlight.

Molly Horton had not been unobservant during the day, and had made up her mind to act when the time came.

It was useless to talk to the others about either surrender or the making of terms, and if she wanted to prevent bloodshed it seemed to her that she must take the matter in her own hands.

There was a place where she believed one light of foot and steady of nerve could scramble down, though it might not be so easy to make the ascent from below. When she thought the time for the effort had come she stole from her couch, and succeeded in making the descent safely. Had it not been for that fleeting glimpse as she approached the lines of the outlaws her friends would have had no suspicion of what had become of her.

It was running a terrible risk to approach the spot where the Black Don was in concealment, but she had passed beyond the limits of fear for herself, and, fortunately, the Roper was on guard.

He never made mistakes.

His keen eyes saw that she carried, fluttering in her hand, something which might well be a flag of truce, and though he could not guess what was the meaning of it, he slipped out to meet her.

The first intimation that she had come within range of the outlaws was when Molly heard the click of the hammer his thumb had forced back.

"Stiddy, thar, you. What's wanted? Are yer alone?"

She heard the thrilling whisper, and answered in the same tone:

"Yes. I am by myself, and I come to prevent bloodshed. I would see your chief."

"Kim for'rards, an' we'll talk ther matter over. I'm not sure thet yer know jest what yer doin'."

"Yes, I do. I want to save perhaps a dozen lives. I refused the offer made to me last night, but now I am willing to accept. I cannot see those who have followed for my sake into this trap suffer for their loyalty; nor would I have them take life to save me the half of a fortune."

"That's ther talk ov a true woman; but, not wantin' ter chip too heavy in what ain't my affair, don't yer think yer hev come a leetle too late?"

"No, no; it can never be too late. So far there has been no harm done; and when they have me there need be no more quarrel between them. Open the way, and my friends will withdraw."

"Excuse me, miss, but does yer friends know yer sittin' up this leetle game on 'em?"

"No. I dared not tell them, or they might have hindered my coming."

"Jest what I thought. You don't know et, but you've bin playin' et purty low down on 'em. They'll hev ther fight all ther same, an' won't hev ther satisfaction ov takin' ther gruel fur the sake ov a woman. Thar ain't no one but me seen yer, an' I kin furgit most mighty sudden. Take ther old man's advice an' go back."

The Roper dropped his voice to the lowest of whispers, and bent forward so

that he could not possibly be overheard. He knew the danger to himself which lay in the advice he was giving.

"No. I have burned my bridges behind me. I have counted the cost, and consider it to be but cheaply done."

"I'm afeared your figgers an' mine wouldn't jibe tergether. Mebbe you don't know about ther new deal."

The Roper might have begun an explanation, but an interruption came, which caused him to close his lips tightly and look with some anxiety at the young lady.

Behind him he heard a footstep, and it was fortunate he had spoken in an undertone.

Canada Chess came almost like a phantom; and scarcely was his coming heard, when his hand was on the Roper's shoulder, and he was staring into Molly's face, against which the moon was now throwing her strongest gleam.

The girl was not at all startled at his appearance, but in a few words told the same story she had given the sentinel.

Carter heard it in silence, but without the appearance of pleasure which she might have expected. When he answered it was somewhat coldly:

"A few hours kin make a great change, an' et's a pity yer didn't think et all over sooner, an' stay whar you war safe. I'll see what I kin do; but et'll be hard ter save bloodshed now, when things hev gone so fur."

He glanced around him, as though measuring the ground.

"You can't do et, boss," interrupted the Roper.

"Things hez started ter runnin', an' reckon they got ter run."

"Yes. Take her back ter camp and give ther alarm. I see ther's somethin' on foot from above."

Without seeming to care for the danger, he stepped out boldly, and, looking upward, shouted:

"Ho, you up thar! Jest a minnit. We've got ther girl, and we mean ter keep her—alive ef we can, dead ef we must. Try ter break inter our camp an' et's her death warrant. An' we'll be ready ter meet yer all ther same. Back, ef yer don't want ter be her death!"

"Touch her if you dare!" came back in the ringing tones of the Sandrock Sharp.

He had lost a little time in making sure the figure he had seen was that of Molly Horton, and getting his companions ready for a move, but they were now stealing down the pathway as swiftly as they could when Chess Carter's threat stopped them.

Up to that moment Soft Velvet had hoped that the girl had not fallen into the hands of the outlaws, though he understood her plan.

Poor child! How could she think that her life was the stake the Black Don was playing for, or that Canada Chess could henceforth only be a minor factor in the game?

"Keep back!" retorted the Gold Bank sport.

"Canada Chess never bluffs unless he means ter play ther limit on his hand. Another step an' we'll open fire."

It was no fear for their own safety which made the little party draw back. They would have been willing enough to start in on a fight to a finish had it not been for the certain danger to the girl. Waiting might not save her, but while there was life there was hope, and so long as he had not put them out of the way as future witnesses, Don Natan might hesitate in his scheme of removing the heir who stood between him and the Morales millions.

And the Don was already at the front with his men, ready to make good the threat of his ally. It was, perhaps, fortunate Chess had been so prompt in his challenge. By this time Soft Velvet and his friends would have been streaming across the open space, where they would have been a fair mark in the moonlight.

"By heavens, I believe they mean it," muttered Soft Velvet. "The scoundrels

would like nothing better than to have us snuff her out with a chance shot; and in this sort of a light small blame to the best of us if we shot a little wild. They may be holding her in the front rank. I reckon the best thing we can do is to retire. But if they try to crowd us we'll have our chance."

It was from no lack of courage that they slipped back.

With themselves only to consider, they would have been out and among the outlaws, cutting a path to the plain beyond; but they could make no present move for the rescue of Molly, and their present position was one of the best for defense and observation they could hope to find.

The withdrawal was done so carefully that they were back in the old position without ever a shot being fired. Don Natan's eyes, sharpened as they were by a hate that was akin to fear, failed to get even a glimpse of their moving figures.

The retreat was made cautiously and on guard, with the thought that an attack might come at any time; but when they had regained the ground above, Hal Keene came to the front with his idea.

"It's our fault she has given herself up. We should have kept a watch on her. Poor girl! She does not understand the danger into which she has thrust herself. We must know what they intend."

The Sandrock Sharp spoke sharply:

"Knowing won't do much good unless we can stop it. Whatever they intend, it will not be safe for her in that camp."

"I will stop it—if it seems there can be no time to bring up the rest. I am going to see what the Black Don is doing, and how Molly is treated."

"Hold on, boy. Long Tom is the right one to scout into the camp of the enemy. He can creep up without being discovered, which is more than the rest of us can do. I was going to propose sending him out."

"Long Tom is a good man, all right enough, and a scout of the first water; but I have my advantages, and I think I can move as silently. If you hear a racket, stay where you are. Don't chip unless I call for you, and then come, boiling."

The lad spoke with confidence, and ended the argument by suddenly drawing back and disappearing.

He had noted where Molly made her way over the rocks, and had followed the same course.

Soft Velvet looked, listened, and was convinced. Not even Long Tom could have moved more silently and more secretly. For a long time he watched with his ear turned in the direction of the Black Don's camp, but he heard nothing.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT.

"In Satan's name, why didst thou make thy threats? What better could we have wanted than that they should have charged us?"

The Black Don had turned savagely to Chess Carter.

"Because I wouldn't hev ther girl runnin' ther-reesk. It's allers ther luck ov sich a one ter git a stray bit ov lead."

"And thus saved us all trouble. I believe thou art of a mind to be a traitor! Once have I spared thy life, when it was surely wiser to take it. That was for the sake of old times and past service; beware that I be not tempted again."

"And I tell yer ter beware how yer stirs up ther old boy in me. I'm willin' you should take a flyer fur ther millions, but I ain't willin' ther gal should come ter death. You kin manage et without that, an' you got ter do et."

Chess Carter spoke with a sullen firmness. In all their past intercourse the Don had seen nothing like this in him, and even yet he doubted if it was regard for the life of the girl which had made his old side pard take this stand.

More likely it was a treachery, pure

and simple, which hoped to remove him out of the way, and grasp the entire fortune—though how it was to be done he did not so clearly see.

For an instant it was a very narrow thing that the two did not fall upon each other. The Don's hand wandered toward his knife, and the fingers of Canada Chess were ready to close around the butt of his revolver.

Each saw the other was on guard, and for that reason the crisis was safely passed. In a fair fight it was likely enough both would be done to death, and each knew it.

The Don laughed carelessly.

"Thou hast come to the heart of a chicken late in the day, but why should we two quarrel? The girl is safe. Already have I sent her away by two safe men, that she may not be here in the line of danger. Thou hast more to win, backing my game than hers. And thou knowest that all these men who know the secret of this gulch must die."

"Unless we wants ter give up our rights in ther find."

"That is it. There might be enough to share, but they never would allow us to take part in it, and when the rush should come a word from them would drive us out, even if they did not care to undertake the task. They know us as we are."

"Don't yer furgit it, thet they will be a hard team ter crawl over. Ther Sharp's all there, and Long Tom kin hold his own with a crowd. Then, thar's a party that could git away with Ned Cowles; an' he's no slouch. S'posin' ther rest don't count, there's a heap ov business kin be got out of them three."

"Rest easy. By morning thou wilt see, if thou art with me. If not—the worst for us and thee."

"And the girl?"

"I have told thee she was safe—that I sent her away under a good escort, so that she may be safe when the fight comes, if fight there is. For a time she must be kept from sight; but no harm will come to her. There is a nunnery that I know of, over the border, where she will be well cared for, and can do no harm till such time as we turn her loose. She is of the Morales blood—dost thou think I would not protect her, even though she might stand between me and the things we know of?"

Chess Carter was not altogether satisfied, yet he quieted his conscience as best he could, thinking that if the time came when there was a fair opening to end this enforced partnership it was possible it would be done in a way the Don scarcely thought of. Had it not been for the men up on the hill he might even now have left him in the lurch.

Unfortunately for him, they knew him as it was death to be known, and there seemed to be nothing to do but join in the fight to the finish—or, rather, the massacre, as Morales intended it should be.

The outlaws were now all on the alert and guarding the pass to the plain with a care which made movement on the part of Soft Velvet and his pards an impossibility. For himself, Carter was willing to go back a little from the front line and take rest. Without further debate he turned away.

He would have been well satisfied that Morales should remain behind, but the chief followed. When the one threw himself down on the ground the other took a like position not far away. They did not trust each other, and it seemed as though their slumbers would not be very sound.

"When the moon has passed around the cliffs and the pass is dark there will be a move. The Roper will lead us. He knows of a way. Till then, why should we not sleep?"

Seemingly more than half to himself, the Black Don muttered these words; and, drawing his blanket around him, appeared to give himself over to slumber.

Yet, all the time his glittering eyes

were fixed on his companion. He was striving to make out whether Carter was on his guard, and he had himself almost decided on a course of action.

All over the camp there was silence. The men on guard were watching keenly, while those who were off duty were buried in slumber. The two were practically alone.

It seemed at last as though Chess Carter had certainly dropped asleep. His face was toward the Don, and his hand was on his revolver, but the long-drawn breath of a regular sleeper could hardly be simulated.

It seemed hardly possible that he could, in any event, detect the slight movements made by Natan, but the latter was taking no chances.

Coolly and slowly he brought the muzzle of his revolver up a trifle from the ground and trained it on the motionless figure.

The view he had was none too distinct, but at that distance it seemed impossible to miss.

His thumb fell upon the hammer. Would the click waken the slumbering man? Or, if it did, would he be able to move so promptly and certainly as to defeat the purpose of the Don?

That remained to be seen, and with a swift motion he forced the hammer back.

A strange blending of sounds and events followed.

There came a sharp, wild cry from the darkness beyond, the noise of rushing feet, and, as the Black Don pulled trigger, Chess Carter sprang up with his wits all about him, and his revolver coming to a line with his treacherous partner.

The chief from the Blazing Star was a marvellous snapshot, and, as he rose, Don Natan felt a thrill of something like terror as his own hammer fell once more, but this time on a worthless cart-ridge.

Flinging down the faithless weapon, with a curse he sprang at Carter like a panther, unmindful of the ball which went raking through his shoulder, and seized him by the throat, just as a bewildered fugitive came against the two with a crash!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

VILLAINS, ALL.

The Black Don told the truth when he said he had sent Molly away with a guard.

As to the goodness of the men who had been detailed as escort, there might have been a difference of opinion. No doubt they were good enough for certain purposes, but they were hardly of the kind Soft Velvet, or Miss Molly herself, would have selected. They were men of Morales' own band, and for cutting a throat or robbing a church they hardly had equals.

Nevertheless, he thought he knew them well, and could rely upon them. They had a brutal courage of their own, and would stop at nothing.

Molly went willingly in the outset. Nothing seemed more natural to her than that there should be a desire to protect her from stray shots, and there had been a hint that her absence would prevent fighting altogether. It was not likely Soft Velvet and his friends would attack the camp if the outlaws when they knew the girl was no longer there.

When they had gone a short distance, and she had some little chance to learn something of her companions, she was not so well at ease.

She had supposed the retreat was not to be for any great distance, and at last mustered up courage enough to ask whither they were going.

"Ask no questions and thou wilt be told no lies," responded one of the men, a Mexican, who seemed to be the leading spirit.

"Surely, it is not wise to go too far. There is danger of being lost in this darkness. As I understood, we were but to go out of the range of flying bullets."

"It is the truth thou speakest. We

were to place thee in a spot of safety, and it will not be far before we come to a halt."

"And the rest? Will they come soon?"

"I know not. Our orders were but to bring thee here, and leave thee. It is likely thou wilt sleep well till aroused."

There was a gloominess in the tone of the man which awoke her suspicions.

Now the excitement of the moment was over, she could see the dark side of everything so much plainer, and it suddenly struck her she was in more danger than ever.

Her late experience with the men who trained under Chess Carter had been wearing, but, after the first, she had not felt in personal danger. She had begun to think that in the end all might go well.

These fellows were different. It almost seemed as though the last words contained a thinly veiled threat.

"Surely, you do not expect me to stay here alone? What is the meaning of this? I begin to have fears."

"As well thou mayst have," was the unexpected answer.

The fellow moved toward her as he spoke, and like a flash it crossed her mind that she had been given over to the hands of a pair of assassins!

It might not have done to slay her before all the band; but these two men, picked for the purpose, would, no doubt, do the work, and she would no longer be in the way of the Black Don, in his effort for the millions.

Chess Carter—the man who had claimed to be her father's brother—had abandoned her to her enemy, and she could expect no mercy.

All this flashed across her mind, and, with the step toward her, she was roused into instant action.

She gave a spring herself, and sought to dart away in a wild flight.

If she had only known it, this was the very thing on which the outlaw was counting.

He was as cruel as the most, but even he had some compunctions about shooting down a girl in cold blood.

He had perfect confidence in his marksmanship, however, and in the little excitement which would follow her breaking away he fancied he could take a snap shot which would do the work as well, and offer some sort of a salve for his conscience, seared and blackened as it was.

The second outlaw had said nothing up to this time, and did not understand the game, but he was ready for the emergency, whipping out his own pistols as he shouted:

"Hold on, thar! Try ter git away an' we bring yer down on ther wing! Halt, I say!"

At that moment Molly gave a blundering stumble, and fell to the ground. There was the chance now to overtake her, but the Mexican put his hand on his comrade's shoulder.

"Let the girl go; it is but part of the game. Watch thou and see me bring her down at twice the distance. Some chance she must have for her life."

"Yes, but yer orter used yer knife," was the inhuman answer.

Again the girl was up, and, gathering her skirts around her, sped away with wonderful swiftness, though none too fast to take her out of the range of that weapon which was carelessly rising.

And then there was a bit of play not down on the bills.

A crouching figure, which had been swiftly though silently approaching, rose up; two fists shot out, and one man fell, while the other staggered away, too much abroad to know what it was had struck him.

"You infernal hounds!" gritted out voice of Lame Johnny.

"Bare-handed I could tear such dogs apart. Take that, and lie there."

He gave a light spring and landed on the prostrate man with both feet. Then he stooped swiftly, tore a revolver from the hand which still instinctively clutched it, fired a shot which tumbled

over the still staggering other outlaw, and without waiting to take stock of the damage done, started off in the wake of Molly Horton.

He had been lying here in hiding ever since his escape, but it was now time for him to come to the front once more.

He called after Molly as he went, but it is doubtful if she heard him. Her fall had confused her more than ever, and she had no idea of anything but getting away from the place as fast and as far as possible.

He followed her as well as he was able, but she was going three feet to his two, and unless she tired or met with some other mishap, it was not likely he would soon overtake her.

Had it been daylight, and had she had her wits all about her, she would most likely have turned her steps in some other direction, for she was returning toward the very place from which she had set out, and the chances were all in favor of her once more falling into the hands of the Black Don.

Now and then she slackened her speed, through sheer want of breath, but still held on in the same course, and the sound of pursuing steps drove her to renewed exertions. She had seen nothing of Lame Johnny's gallant attack, and had no thought that friends might come to her from the rear.

And this was the way it happened that she came suddenly upon the two struggling leaders, who knew nothing of her approach until she blundered against them with full force.

Molly came at a fortunate time for Chess Carter.

Both men were wounded, but he far the worst. The first bullet of the Black Don had ploughed through and through the upper part of his left arm, and an ordinary man might have been prostrated by the shock. If he was making a vigorous, vicious fight for his life, it was by savage instinct and against odds. Though Morales was bleeding, it was from a mere flesh wound, and his one hand was on the throat of Canada Chess, while the other had already touched the knife at his belt.

The cry uttered by Molly at the unexpected collision startled the men, and the force of the shock happened to come in exactly the right direction to drive them apart.

Chess Carter staggered one way and the Black Don another, while Molly, dropping to her knees through the force of the impact, crouched between them.

To her eyes the light was dim, and she could but shadowily make out the forms of the two men who glared at her and each other. To the Don, accustomed to life in darkness, and trusting to his vision by the moonlight, all was plain.

He recognized the girl, and knew that his agents had made their effort and failed. He had the work to do for himself, and beyond her was Chess Carter, crouching for a spring.

He wasted no time, but, with a bound, caught her by the wrist, and, with a powerful wrench, drew her up between him and the sport from Gold Bank.

At the same time he raised his knife, and between his clinched teeth he gritted:

"Die, both of ye! Die!"

CHAPTER XXXIX. VOICES OF THE NIGHT

Though he did not know it, the movement of the Don was his salvation. When he drew Molly Horton to her feet a pistol that was already covering him was thrust away, and, leopard-like, a slender figure cast itself upon his back, with nervous, steel-like fingers crushing into his throat.

Chess Carter, or an expert like Soft Velvet, would not have feared to take the chances, but with the new-comer the safety of the girl was to be thought of first and all the time. He would not run the risk of a bullet going through and through and striking her on the other side.

And then, Hal Keene was hardly hard-

ened enough to shoot even such a man in the back, and without warning.

"Run!" he exclaimed in a low voice, while his fingers dug in deeper than ever. "Back to the gorge and call for help! The fight may as well be now, if they mean to force it. Away!"

He had no intention of remaining here a moment longer than was necessary, but he thought it might be possible to save Molly a start of a moment or so. As he had seen the foul attack upon Carter, he counted rather on his assistance if he had fighting strength, which he thought somewhat doubtful.

Fortunately, Molly Horton was not too much bewildered to hear the advice; nor was she cool enough to refuse to take it. Without hesitation she bounded away.

With only these two men to confront him, Hal Keene would not have felt so much fear of the result. Already he had calculated how quickly he could draw his revolver when his hold on the Don's throat was once broken. The trouble was that though the two shots might not have brought the outlaws to the spot, the succeeding turmoil could not but reach their ears, and if Morales could gasp even one cry for help it would be there in a moment. No doubt it was only the peculiar discipline of the band which had prevented investigation up to the present time.

Chess Carter had staggered back, as though unmanned by the reaction, and now Hal heard footsteps coming toward the spot, and voices. The Black Don would have help on the ground unless something was done to stop the advance.

"Back all!" shouted a voice, which seemed to be that of Morales.

"Away! This is my affair. Death to the man who interferes!"

If the words halted a little it was not strange for a speaker who was laboring under the disadvantage of excitement and a scarcity of breath.

But the rush was stopped, and the outlaws, who had not yet come close enough to distinguish clearly the struggle going on, turned back.

It was not safe to cross the Black Don, even for his own good, and if there was a private quarrel with Chess Carter it was his own affair. Their business was with the men up the gorge, who knew the secret of their bonanza.

Morales heard, but could not interfere.

All the sound he could make was a gurgling cry, which told nothing. No one could recognize it as coming from his lips, while the imitation of his voice had been almost perfect!

But that only gave Hal Keene a little time, and, strong as he was for his inches, it was hardly likely that after the first surprise he could keep on this way until he had choked the life out of the outlaw.

Suddenly the fight took on a fierceness it had not before assumed.

The outlaw realized he must make a desperate effort, for though his assailant was but a stripling, he was fighting with the strength and fierceness of a leopard, and that gripe on his throat was at last completely shutting off the breath. He sprang into the air with an almost superhuman effort, and then flung himself heavily backward, at the same time seizing Hal from either side, so that he could not squirm away.

The fall was terrific, and the Don managed to add his whole weight to the shock. Hal was even more breathless than himself, and for an instant the two lay side by side, utterly motionless.

Then Morales leaped to his feet and glared around him long enough to see that both Carter and the girl had disappeared.

He did not take time to finish the lad, who lay like one dead, for that would have been but a trifle of private vengeance, which could keep. The Morales millions was the stake he was playing for now, and the girl must not entirely elude his gripe. He drew a long breath, which seemed to bring back life and strength, and then he darted off in the direction taken by Molly Horton.

As he hurried along he thought quickly.

Surely, some one would intercept her if she attempted to pass the line of sentinels; or, if she had run to the main body for protection, he would have her there. With a dozen men on his side, those above would be slow to make an attack when they would have to charge in plain sight of concealed marksmen, about whose shooting they certainly ought to have a very good opinion. The men who trained behind the Black Don were not likely to be tyros.

He kept straight on, and increased his pace as he heard a warning shout, and then a report. Molly was running the gauntlet of the watchers, and perhaps the shot had brought her down!

If not, she must be stopped and taken at all hazards.

"Forward all!" he shouted in a voice which rang through the night. "Shoot down whoever attempts to cross the lines!"

Every man was on the qui vive, and hardly knowing what to look for, yet believing some desperate work was on hand, a general rush was made. Fortunately for the heiress to the Morales millions, she had slipped by those off duty, and her silent flight carried her through the line formed by the two or three men on the watch.

Speeding across the open ground she was a fair mark, and she heard, with her senses marvellously sharpened, the clicking of hammers following the order of the chief.

And then, half way to the foot of the ascending path by which she and Dugan had made their escape, she fell once more.

The fall saved her. As she lay, helpless, half a dozen of the outlaws dashed forward to capture her, and were not half a dozen yards away when right from the ground, as it appeared, a figure started up to face them, and, with outstretched hands, shouted:

"Halt, and hands up! Surrender or die!"

It was only a single man to stop them, and his warning was the height of rashness, yet he had never yet opened a ball without due notice, and he did not mean to begin to do it now.

The men never halted, but drove right on, while two or three hastily leveled pistols were fired.

Then the revolvers of the Sport from Sandrock began to talk. These men had taken their chance at him; he proposed to take his certainty with them. He had banked on his own marvellous luck, and so far had not been disappointed. Now, with cold certainty, first with the right hand, then with the left, shot following shot with scarcely an appreciable interval, he marked them down.

CHAPTER XL. FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

Soft Velvet was just as cool as though shooting at clay pigeons in a sweepstakes for a ten-dollar prize. Though in some little danger, he had faith in himself and his luck, and believed that as far as this half dozen was concerned, he held the whip hand.

The real peril would be when he turned with the girl to place her in a safer position. While she was there it would not be safe to go blundering forward in search of the others, who might be hidden not far away.

He was not shooting to kill, but did mean to cripple, and succeeded in that most effectually.

Men reeled this way and that, or fell outright, and when the last one had been struck he darted to Molly's side and raised her from the ground.

This time she seemed to have hurt herself badly, for she groaned with pain, and then fainted altogether. Small blame to the sport if he fancied it was time for him to retire, since, as he stooped, a bullet flew over his head, and the second instalment of the band, headed by the Black Don himself, sprang into view.

Then a man rose up, who had been lying unnoticed where he had dropped. It was Chess Carter, who had followed thus far almost in the wake of the fugitive girl.

"Hold, villain!" he shouted, as he faced the Black Don.

"You have given me my death wound, but there's enough life left to repay you."

He spoke thickly, moved feebly, and yet drove forward with a courage that would not be denied.

The Black Don looked at him, recognized him, and the two closed in deadly conflict.

The fight was brief, though the men of either captain halted to look at it, but half understanding the situation, yet almost ready to fly at each others' throats.

While they looked there was a change in the situation. Lame Johnny appeared on the scene, Hal Keene came rushing from the shade of the timber, Mickey Dugan and Long Tom came down the path, and Euphrozone Mount Albyn was already by the side of the Man from Sandrock.

The little party was once more reunited, and now they charged, just as the Black Don fell back, heavily, and Chess Carter sank to the ground.

There was no longer a disparity in numbers, and the sudden attack produced a panic. The mouth of the gorge was swept clear of the outlaws, and only one of Carter's men remained, and he was bending over the sorely wounded man.

He looked up with sullen courage, raising his hands above his head.

"Take my tools ef yer wants 'em; I'm only stayin' with ther boss. It looks ez though his checks was all counted ready ter cash in, but yer can't 'most always tell. An' ef yer sez so, thar kin be peace with our boys. They'll draw off ef you wants ter march out. They don't belong to ther gang ov ther Black Don, an' are prospectin' hyer all squar' an' straight. All they asks is ter him back when you go 'way."

Soft Velvet hesitated, and would perhaps have refused had it not been for Frozzie's restraining hand on his shoulder, as he leaned over to whisper:

"Let et go at that, let et go. This ain't my find. I've bin all over the ground, an' they're welcum ter this prospect. An' wild hosses couldn't draw 'em away fur ther present."

"It's a fair offer," said Soft Velvet, when he had heard this, addressing the man who was bending over Carter. "I'm afraid there are none too many of them left, but you can give them my compliments and say if they keep out of pistol range they shan't be hurt. You can also inform the whole outfit that we have no dollars, but plenty of bullets, and if they are wise they will stay out of range. There is nothing to be gained, and everything to lose, getting to close quarters with us."

"Ef you ain't objectin' I'll try an' git word to 'em. Ther boss seems ter hev jest a fightin' chance fur his life, an' we can't afford no side issues."

"All right, but if you play us false, it will be at your peril, and his. I'll look him over and see what I can do, though it appears like a gone case."

Miss Molly's faint had been but temporary, and he fancied he was needed more right here. The Man from Sandrock was no bad surgeon, and he could not allow Carter to die before his eyes. Other wounded men needed his good offices also, and he might have spent the night and a number of other days and nights by the side of his patients had he waited for their recovery.

But the fact was he was willing to get out of the neighborhood as soon as possible, and had no notion of trusting to the present panic, or any future promises, to preserve him and his party.

Molly had sprained her ankle badly enough when she fell, but he decided that it was far safer for her to suffer a little and go on.

Carter recovered his strength some-

what, and, as the Man from Sandrock was giving him a final looking over, spoke in a low tone.

His story was not of much importance until it came to the fact that he had certain papers of importance, which were at the service of the young lady, as they would not be apt to be much use to him.

The moribund sport smiled grimly as he said that, and motioned to his breast, from which Soft Velvet drew the packet.

All this was under the cover of the revolvers of his friends, and when as many of the men as had serious occasion for it had been bound up, and had been given a few words of wholesome advice, the young lady was mounted on the inevitable burro, the party fell back up the gorge, and disappeared along the trail pointed out to them by Long Tom.

Concerning the journey which followed it is not necessary to speak.

There was some toil and a little suffering, but Miss Molly got back to the outskirts of civilization without further danger, and, with her friend, Hal Keene, the ventriloquist detective, set out for a successful trip to claim the Morales fortune.

Before she went Soft Velvet took her hand.

"Once upon a time I did you a harm, though it was beyond my power to help it. I am not a desirable acquaintance for a young lady to make, but I think you are none the worse for having met me, and perhaps I have to some little extent atoned."

She would have overwhelmed him with thanks, but he would hear no more, and there was no telling how soon Mickey would reveal to her something which seemed so far to have been kept a secret from her.

Michael also went with her, and shortly after her claim was established, his family, including Bridget, the childer, and the important Jimmy, left Gold Bank, and the supposition was the heiress had provided for them.

While the outlaws had unearthed gold-bearing rock, which would pay for the working, it was not the bonanza Frozzie had found, nor could it be profitably handled by them. By the time Soft Velvet and Euphrozone Mount Albyn—who has since shortened his name to Jack Smith, and dropped a great deal of nonsense from his conversation—had made the return trip, the gang of the Black Don and the men of Chess Carter's outfit had given up and flitted. What became of Carter was uncertain, but he was never seen again in Gold Bank; nor was Morales again heard of on the trails.

But a bonanza there was, or something very like, and Jack Smith and his partners made a fortune from it. Soft Velvet sports a different name now, and if Smith has not yet reached the Senate he is likely to make the effort.

Meantime, he and his friends have nothing to complain of in regard to the fortune which befell them when they entered into the rustle for millions.

THE END.

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